THE STONY TRAIL

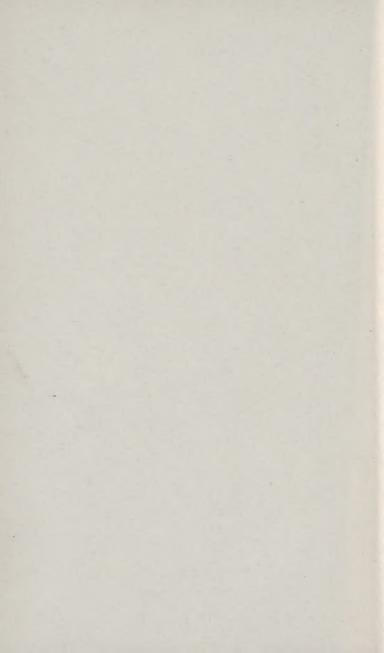
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THE STONY TRAIL

Novel: By May Sutherland

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THE STONY TRAIL

CHAPTER I

THE middle-aged man, bearing the unmistakable stamp of a physician, halted a moment at the hall door to pick up his hat, and, taking advantage of the brief pause, the woman accompanying him repeated a former question.

"You are sure, quite sure, doctor, that it would do him

good? I want to feel positive---'

"The world of good!" he assured her heartily. "What he needs is complete rest and change, and he ought to get both out there." He paused, running keen but kindly eyes over the pale face beside him. "And you look as if you could do with a holiday! This has been a trying time. Take my advice, and the opportunity; it may be the making of him. Good afternoon, Mrs. Holt. I'll look in again this week."

Mrs. Holt, having closed the door behind him, returned to the sitting-room of her flat, a large, pleasant room, comfortably, even richly, furnished, the most striking feature

being a very fine grand piano.

It was the month of February, and the weather bitterly cold. The fire, piled with blazing logs, threw out a rosy light, revealing the figure of another woman seated near in one of the deep arm-chairs that stood on either side of the hearth.

A stout, middle-aged woman this, wrapped in a heavy fur coat, with a fashionable toque more startling than tasteful, and very high-heeled, coloured kid shoes which she was contemplating at the moment with every appearance of satisfaction.

Her eyes, narrowed and strained as if tried by brilliant lights, her thickly powdered cheeks, painted mouth, and over-elaborate coiffure would give an observer a feeling of repulsion were it not for the expression of frank goodhumour habitual to her face. Otherwise, she was simply a fat, rather common-looking woman, expensively and extravagantly attired. Yet a famous one, for this was Marie Courtice, star comedienne of the English variety stage. She looked up as Mrs. Holt entered, speaking in a tone that was entirely in keeping with her general appearance, lacking refinement but full of kindly amiability.

"Well, dearie, and what did the old chap say?"

Marion Holt crossed the room slowly, sinking into the chair opposite with a sigh that betrayed utter weariness of mind and body.

"Oh, he said the trip would do Gerald good, as I thought. He advised us to go," she answered in a low, musical

voice.

"Just what I said, didn't I?"—with friendly triumph.

"And yet you keep hesitating. Can't you make your mind up? Glory!" she added reflectively. "I wish to God I had the chance! I'm about sick of work! work! work!"

Marion glanced up, smiling involuntarily at the ejaculation, coming as it did from one who seemed to thrive remarkably well despite her trying circumstances, and the older woman, catching the glance, herself relaxed into a good-natured smile.

"Oh, I know me looks don't pity me," she agreed. "But, all the same for that, you get a bit tired after thirty

years of it, I can tell you!"

Marion gave a quick exclamation. It might have been of surprise or horror—perhaps a shade of both.

"Thirty years!"

The other nodded, staring into the heart of the fire,

suddenly serious.

"Thirty years," she repeated slowly. "Some good, some bad—a hell of a life even when they were good." She sighed, turned it quickly to a laugh, raising a defiant face to her companion. "Well, a short life and a merry one, say I. What's the good of moaning? It never made things better. You know that!" And then, as if aware of treading on delicate ground, with a clumsy return to her former remark:

"Still, thirty years before the public ain't bad, dearie."
"Thirty years!" Marion murmured, seeming to hear

nothing but that one remarkable fact. "Why, I've only done eight—and already it seems like eighty!"

Marie raised an emphatic hand.

"Yes!" she remonstrated. "But then, y'see, you ain't cut out for it, dearie, and won't be if you stick it for a hundred years. What you ought to have done was to marry a business man—a steady, reliable chap with a nice house—and had a family. Instead of which you go and take on with a musical genius like Holt and start doing a double turn!"

Marion sighed again, that hopelessly weary sigh.

"I know, Marie! I wouldn't say it to anyone but you

-it was a mistake! I realise it now."

"Course it was!" returned Marie. "Not so far as he was concerned, though. You're all right at the work; you've the voice and the looks. Some, most of 'em, ain't got either!"

"You were always too kind---"

"Not me!" cried her friend in a tone that left no room for doubt. "I know talent when I see it, and when I see it I say so! Same as I say something pretty when I hear some of 'em screeching and shrieking! No, dearie, it's the life what don't suit you; so take my tip and clear off to Canada with Holt. P'raps he'll develop a fancy for staying out there."

"I'm afraid not," replied Marion, with a dubious shake of the head. "I expect he'll be mad when I suggest such

a thing."

"Then don't! Book your passage and tell him after. He can't kick. He ain't got enough stuffin' left in him to kick, after a two months' illness. It's a marvel to me he's alive!"

Privately she thought it a great pity as well, being of he firm opinion that Holt was no good physically or morally, but she knew Marion was one to resent remarks that verged on familiarity, and kept it to herself.

"Do you know," Marion said, after a moment's consideration, "I've really a good mind to do that—I mean, settle

t all and ask him afterwards."

Resolution, and what was more relieving to the kindly

woman watching her, a hint of laughter, shone in her eyes.

Marie slapped her knee sharply with a prompt:

"That's the stuff! Y' know, all jokes aside, you always were too soft over Holt. He needs a firm hand—there! I don't mean to be rude. As I said before, you never ought to have married him. I said so the first day I saw you—you remember? At the Brighton Hippodrome."

"That was seven years ago last April," said Marion softly, resting a hand on the older woman's arm. "As if I could forget how kind you were, Marie. How you

tried to make me feel less homesick-"

"Oh, dry up!" interrupted Marie, with as much uneasiness as if she had been accused of a crime. "S'pose I liked the look of you, or p'raps I'd had one or two extra that night and felt sloppy—"

Marion laughed, withdrawing her hand, but her eyes were suspiciously moist. She was one of the few who had discovered the golden quality of the heart the vulgar words

covered, and was not deceived.

"The same old Marie!" she exclaimed, getting up as she spoke to switch on the light. "When will you alter,

I wonder!"

"Never!" retorted Marie, without a moment's thought.

"As I was born, so I shall die—a rough diamond—bit o' the sparkle gone, but otherwise wearing well. Rough! I should say so! And who wouldn't be if they were born in Aldgate? Yes, dearie, 'That's the place where I was born!" She sang the words in a voice that had once been sweet, but which now was only boldly confident. "Yes, Aldgate—and ain't ashamed of it, either!"

Marion crossed to the door, and, ringing the bell, ordered tea of the white-capped, pleasant-faced maid who appeared at the summons and slipped out again with a respectful

"Yes; ma'am!"

"I don't know why I should be," Marie reflected, loosening her coat at the prospect of tea. "But there you are, that's where I was born. And no roses round the door either! Plenty o' dirty noses, though: eight kids always scrapin' round you! I cleared, soon as I could—got taken on in a pantomime for Christmas. Always was

fond of dancing, and had plenty of cheek, so I got on.]

meant to! And I wasn't particular how!"

A hard note, sharp and bitter, had crept into the goodhumoured voice as her mind travelled back over the years. One heard in it the echo of that other phrase she had used: "A hell of a life!"

Marion Holt shuddered as she listened, busying herself with the teacups that had just been brought in. She knew only too well what that last sentence meant, and her very soul recoiled from it, though it made no difference

to her feeling for the woman opposite.

Marie Courtice, with her doubtful past, the sordid stepping-stones she had used to reach the pinnacle of popularity, had proved a good friend to the shrinking, reluctant girl Gerald Holt had used to make his business profitable and enhance his reputation, and that one fact was sufficient to win Marion's affection.

"I was born at Hampstead," she said rather hurriedly, in order to change the distasteful subject, pouring out a cup of tea and handing it to her friend. "That is why I chose Belsize Park when we were looking for a flat. I think I told you my parents died when I was very young and I was brought up by my uncle, a musical critic, who had my voice trained for the concert platform—"

"Oh!" interrupted Marie, with surprise. "So you

had meant to be a singer? I didn't know that."

"Why, yes! I thought I told you. I was very keen. I studied and practised for hours on end. I was much more enthusiastic in those days." She sighed a little as she sat down. "It was at a music festival that I first met Gerald."

"Ah!" Marie's tone was exceedingly dry. "I can guess the rest." Her voice softened, however, as she met Marion's anxious, enquiring glance. "You, a young girl, full of enthusiasm as you say—Gerald, a young composer, popular, good-looking, just beginning to be famous. Ah, well!"

"Exactly!" said Marion very low, a world of pain in her eyes. "You know he—he——" It was like a plea, the loyn one, in her own defence. "He can be very charming."

Marie nodded. Being equally intimate with the hus-

band as the wife, she thoroughly understood.

"And he was young," the voice continued hesitatingly. "Gay-I didn't understand what that meant then! I thought myself in love. I suppose I was--'

Despite her self-control tears rushed to her eyes, and

the lips quivered piteously.

"There! There!" cried Marie hastily, always dismayed at the sight of emotion. "Cheer up, dearie! You ain't the first woman who thought she'd found an angel."

"I didn't expect him to be that, and it wasn't his temper

so much—he was very kind and considerate at first."

Kind and considerate! To his young bride! Gerald Holt, what must you be now, after eight years of married life, if that was all you could show to your credit

when love was at its height?

"It was this question of going on the 'halls.' I naturally thought I was to look after our home life, and him. I never dreamt of a career after we were married. I didn't want it. And the music-halls! I tried to persuade him in every way, but he had fixed up a big contract, and it was impossible to move him. Well, we were a great success, as you know, and he was so delighted, so pleased! I was really glad for a time. But I couldn't stand it long, Marie. There was no home comfort, so much excitement, travelling, late hours. I couldn't stand it! And," remembering her companion, she faltered a moment before adding frankly, "I disliked many of the people we were forced to meet. I thought they did Gerald no good. It seemed a bad life altogether to me. I wanted to leave it, but it was no use. He would not listen to reason, and so "she gave a slight, hopeless gesture that spoke volumes-"I just had to make the best of it."

"Hm!" Marie rose, wrapping her coat about her generous figure in readiness to depart. "And that was

eight years ago?"
"Eight years," Marion repeated, and all the weary heartache of them was reflected in her voice, though she tried to smile. "Then Gerald broke down through this heart trouble." Through burning the candle at both ends.

thought Marie, but had the presence of mind for once not

to say so.

"So now the future is uncertain. He'll want to go straight back, I expect, but I hope he'll give way and consent to visit Mr. Fortescue's ranch for six months. It would do us both good."

A letter bearing a Canadian postmark was lying on the

table. Marie glanced at it.

"Who is this Fortescue chap? Don't seem to have

heard you mention him-"

"Oh, Mr. Fortescue and Gerald were school-friends and neighbours; but Mr. Fortescue went abroad very young. Well, when he was about twenty, I should think. His mother died at his birth, and his father emigrated, leaving him to the care of his mother's sister. When he had finished his education he joined his father, but they were only together five years—old Mr. Fortescue being killed by a fall from his horse. It was very sad. He has always corresponded with Gerald. I have never seen him myself. Read the letter," she added, handing it to Marie, who took it with great interest.

It was headed by the address, and, the letter being very brief and very much to the point, the postal directions

seemed almost the longest part of it.

"Lone Star Creek Ranch,
"Lone Star Creek,
"Near Mirror,
"Alberta,
"Canada.

"Dear Mrs. Holt,—I was much grieved to hear from you of my old pal's serious illness, which accounts for not hearing from him for some months. You say it will be a long time before he is fit to work—then bring him out here for six months. Apart from the passage, the expenses will be nil; and in God's own country we will make a new man of him. Wire to say when you will arrive. Don't let the thought of the journey worry you any. Arrangements will be made this end to relieve you of anxiety. I can assure you everything possible

will be done for your comfort and happiness if you decide to come out."

It ended as simply as it began:

"Your sincere friend,
"JOHN FORTESCUE."

"I like that man!" exclaimed Marie, folding the letter and putting it back into its envelope. "No palaver, no fuss—says what he's got to say and done with it. Says the right thing, too! Notice, expenses nil! Yes, I like him; and I've a jolly good mind to put in for an invitation on those terms myself!" Adding, as she moved to the door, "Do as I say, dearie, put your foot down for once. If he makes a fuss send for me. I'll soon settle him!"—with the conscious power of the woman who had successfully disposed of two husbands and was ready to deal drastically with the third if necessary.

Marion had to smile. Perhaps the thought of Marie and Gerald in an argument had its humorous side—for the onlooker. Probably Gerald would not have found it amusing, for Marie could "let fly," as she termed it, when

she liked.

"I think I will," said Marion, the older woman's confidence inspiring her with new courage. "I must confess

I would like to go."

"Then go!" returned Marie; but added with strange softness as she stooped to kiss her, "We'll miss you all the same, though." And then instantly, as if ashamed of her momentary lapse into sentiment, "Well, cheerio, dearie—so long!"

CHAPTER II

It was inevitable that there should be something of a scene when Gerald Holt learnt of the proposed visit to Canada

a fortnight later.

While he sat, or for the most part, lay before the sitting-room fire gradually recovering from his almost fatal attack, his wife, unknown to him, quietly put their contracts and financial affairs in order, found a tenant for the flat, consulted guide-books and time-tables innumerable, purchased outfits, and finally booked two first-class berths on the *Empress of Scotland*, due to sail on the 14th March from Southampton to Montreal.

Having completed all arrangements, the only thing necessary now was her husband's consent before wiring John Fortescue, and therefore one evening when Gerald was fairly good-tempered—a rare event in these days of weakness and idleness—Marion silently handed him the letter of invitation and sat back in her chair, somewhat

pale and highly strung, to note the effect.

She had not long to wait.

Gerald, taking it with an air of boredom, scanned it through, gave a slight grunt, and tossed it on to the table

beside him carelessly.

Gerald Holt, it might be seen then, was a fair-haired, fair-skinned man of about thirty to thirty-two years of age, tall, and slim in the ordinary way, but now painfully thin and hollow-cheeked from his long illness. Goodlooking, but the good looks marred by the stamp of ill-health and an irritable, peevish nature. Still, at times the over-bright blue eyes would soften, the face relax from its bitter lines into a smile that made those who knew him wonder why he refrained from smiling more often, so much charm it gave to his appearance.

He was always immaculately, even fastidiously, attired. At the present moment he was lying wrapped in a handsome dressing-gown of crimson silk, with velvet slippers to

match on his out-thrust feet.

Undoubtedly a genius where music was concerned, he was at the height of his popularity, a composer of merit, and a fine exponent of the art of pianoforte playing, in high favour with the public, and in certain circles much admired and liked—but it is a significant fact that these same circles had little praise to spare for Gerald Holt's wife.

She, sitting now anxiously awaiting his comment, was nonplussed for the moment at his off-handed reception of the letter, but knowing, after all her arranging, that the conversation must go forward, she rallied her forces and said gently, after a moment:

"Don't you think it is very nice of Mr. Fortescue to

offer us such a long holiday, Gerald?"

Gerald reluctantly opened his eyes, yawned lazily, and stared across the room at his wife in a disinterested sort of way, as if the matter was quite beneath his notice.

"I suppose it was," he said languidly, in the grudging tone of one who fancies such generosity must have an ulterior motive behind it. "Anyway, we don't need his charity."

Marion's heart sank at the prospect of the tussle before her, but she had been gathering her courage together for a fortnight, and for once in her life meant to make a

stand.

"I don't suppose he thinks we need charity, either. He just wanted to do something because you were old friends. He knows we are well able to afford a holiday——"She paused, but he made no reply. "I"—she brought it out with an effort—"I should very much like to go."

Even to that Gerald made no answer. Possibly the remark fell on deaf ears. What his wife would like very rarely entered his mind, and would certainly not trouble

him in the slightest degree if it did.

"And you must have a holiday, the doctor said—"
The persistent voice, quiet though it was, penetrated and roused his sleepy senses to alertness. "I think we ought to try and manage it."

Gerald drew himself up on the couch in stupefied amaze-

ment, staring blankly.

"Do you actually mean to say you are contemplating such a proposal?" he gasped. "Good lord!" And he collapsed into his former attitude as if the mere thought of it had literally knocked him out.

His action was ludicrous in the extreme, but Marion saw nothing to smile at. She leant forward in her chair, very earnest and resolved, only her clenched hands revealing

the effort she was making.

"Of course I am," she returned steadily. "It's a chance

in a thousand!"

"What? To stagnate on a ranch? Good God! You've

got some darned funny ideas!"

"Why stagnate?" his wife put in swiftly, ignoring the latter part of his remark, partly because it was one she had heard many times before. "You would say that about a holiday anywhere—and a holiday you must have."

"I'm not going to rest!"

"It just doesn't lie in your hands, fortunately," she told him, and the tone of quiet conviction gave him a sudden sense of dismay. "You're not fit or capable to do anything but rest for a long time. You'll find you've hardly strength enough to play—"

"Rubbish!" he interrupted rudely. "I shall be back

at work in a fortnight!

"Not with me!"

Marion managed to make that final stand calmly despite the rush of painful colour to her face, the quick beating of her heart.

So strange it was to hear such swift, sharp answers from his wife—his wife who always followed his commands obediently. He raised himself again, gazing at her incredulously.

"What-what in the world are you driving at?" he

stammered. "What do you mean?"

"What I say," she returned quietly. "If you haven't sufficient sense to know that you are quite incapable of work before next winter at the earliest, I have. Another thing you seem to forget is that I have been nursing you

practically day and night for two months, and I'm feeling the strain, the need of a change. I consider Mr. Fortescue's kind invitation a delightful opportunity for an entirely new experience."

"A fine experience!" her husband sneered. "Marooned on a God-forsaken cattle-ranch, with a lot of roughs for company. Perhaps your taste lies in that direction; mine

doesn't I "

"A pity you can find no interest in country life, glorious scenery, and good friends!" Marion retorted, with unusual vigour, and spirit. "Ours would have been a happier marriage had your thoughts dwelt on more simple things, Gerald."

As he remained sullenly silent, she added more gently

after a moment:

"I would like to go, as I said, for your sake as well as my own. Do you think—put it to yourself—do you think you are fit to appear before the public in your condition? Why, you're not even a pleasing spectacle to look at!"

Any allusion to his looks she knew would touch home,

and was quite prepared when he flew into a rage.

"Go on! Say I'm a physical wreck! a disfigurement!" he raved, tears of weakness and temper in his eyes. "Say I've no talent! I can't play! I'm only a blot——"

His wife rose from her chair and, crossing to his side,

stooped soothingly over him.

"Be quiet, Gerald!" she said, as one speaks to a naughty child. "You will make yourself ill again. Do you hear? And that will mean the end of your career altogether."

The truth of the words frightened and silenced him in a moment. Gerald Holt's career was his god, the one thing in all the world his selfish heart had room for. He lay listening, resentful but silent, as Marion continued quietly.

"You want to get well, don't you? You want me fit to appear with you? Of course you do! So just say

'Yes.' I-I don't often ask you for anything."

The pathos of the words was quite lost on her husband. "It would ruin my career!"

My career! Never ours!

"How absurd! You would be back, well and strong, for the winter season. You need not waste time. You

could go on with your composing-"

She knew he was considering the matter deeply by the look on his face, despite his annoyance. That home thrust about his looks; the knowledge of his own weakness, had badly scared him. Perhaps—

Marion waited quietly. Presently:

"Oh, hang!" he said violently, "I suppose you'll have

it your own way."

Another man, looking up in time to see the quick, thankful tears brimming in the heavy-ringed eyes would probably have been moved to tenderness, remembering the long weeks of patient care and attention.

Gerald Holt, with that rankling thought of his own changed appearance still in mind, gave an impatient twist of the shoulders, his face reflecting all his inward annoyance.

"For God's sake don't start snivelling!" he cried irritably. "Do you think it will improve your looks? You've got what you want, so there's no need to shed tears. But don't expect me to wax enthusiastic over the prospect!"

Shed tears! Not before him! Never let him have

that satisfaction!

At the first exclamation, indescribably callous as he

uttered it, they were forced back.

"I haven't asked you to," she responded steadily. "I merely asked you to consent. You need not fear it will cause you any inconvenience. I will attend to everything. As usual, you have merely to give yourself up to the enjoyment of the situation! With regard to my looks"—a slight, bitter smile curved her lips as she looked down on him—"I think any comment from you is uncalled for, seeing that my appearance has long ceased to interest you to any degree!"

Ignoring resolutely the stare of blank astonishment with which he received the unexpected retort, Marion glanced

across to the clock on the mantelshelf.

"It is time you vere in bed, Gerald."

He went without protest, only because he was thoroughly

tired and exhausted, having been up most of the day. His wife's tender heart smote her more than once, noting that slow progress, the halting movements, and, despite the indifference he had shown her but a few moments before, hovered round with hands that anticipated his every want.

Having seen him at last safely between the sheets, she brought in his supper, a delicious basin of bread and milk, at which he immediately let forth a string of complaints, chiefly on the infantile quality of the meals she gave him.

Nevertheless, moving about the room on a pretext of clearing away his clothes, Marion noticed, with a half-smile that said something for her sense of humour, that he consumed every drop with apparent relish.

As he finished she took the basin from him, and with deft hands shook up his pillows, making him comfortable

for the night.

"You might turn that light down," he said fretfully, drawing the satin eiderdown over his shoulders. "It tries my eyes!"

"Yes, dear."

The light was instantly lowered to a faint, restful glimmer.

"I didn't say turn it out!" he snapped. "You always

go to the extreme-"

His wife readjusted it without a word. Had she wished to reply he gave her no time.

"How long has the fire been lit?"

"It was lit this afternoon. Are you cold?"

"Oh, no!"—with a sarcastic sneer. "The heat is overpowering!"—

She stirred the fire to a blaze, sought for and found a

heavy travelling-rug and threw it across his body.

"For God's sake don't smother me!"

"I'm sorry! Is there anything else you want?"
Oh, patience! Oh, wearying, wearying time!

Marion escaped at last, and returned to the sitting-room tired and spent, longing for rest, yet grasping at the delight of an hour alone by the fire before sheneed enter that room again, hoping that by then he would be sleeping soundly.

But to-night her peace was to be disturbed, for as she drew up her chair to the hearth the maid entered.

"A lady to see Mr. Holt, ma'am. What shall I tell

her?

Marion turned quickly in surprise.

"Mr. Holt? Who is she? At this hour, too"—not a little annoyed at the unwelcome intrusion.

"She didn't give her name, ma'am; she's quite a

stranger."

Marion looked undecided for a moment, ready almost to refuse the unknown visitor, but courtesy conquered.

"You had better show her in. Mr. Holt has gone to bed." She smiled faintly as she met the girl's eyes. "Would you mind waiting up to show her out, Ellen?

I'll get rid of her as soon as I can; I know you're tired."
"Why, of course!" said Ellen, in a way that showed
there was little she would not do for such a mistress.

Marion stood with her back to the door as the girl went out, staring thoughtfully into the fire, wondering a little as to who the caller might be. Ladies who wished to see Mr. Holt usually made it convenient to see him elsewhere; it was most unusual for one to call at the flat, where there was always the possibility of meeting his wife.

As the door opened again she turned round.

A tall, graceful figure stood facing her, wrapped in a gorgeous fur coat under which could be seen the shimmering folds of a delicate evening gown. The visitor wore no hat; the rich, golden hair—whether beautiful by art or nature it was hard to say—was wonderfully waved, and dressed in striking fashion, and lightly covered by a thin silk scarf. Marion, looking at her with critical eyes, admitted the purity of her complexion, the flawless beauty of the deep blue eyes and red, enticing lips. A more attractive woman than the one before it would have been almost impossible to find, and yet Marion, who delighted in all forms of loveliness, found nothing in that perfect face to admire.

Rather, as she gazed at it, her brows contracted a little, and her voice, that usually welcomed visitors so cordially, held more than a hint of coldness as she said:

"You wished to see Mr. Holt?"

As she spoke the lady came forward, walking with almost insolent grace, her eyes taking stock openly of the dark-

eved woman standing so quietly by the fire.

"Yes! it was Mr. Holt I wished to see," she returned somewhat haughtily. "My name is Pamela Cartwright. You are Mrs. Holt, I believe. I have seen you on the stage."

Marion bowed her acknowledgment.

"I am sorry you have had your call to no purpose, Miss—oh! Mrs. Cartwright. My husband has been ill, as you probably know, and is not yet sufficiently recovered to be up late, or to see visitors, either. He has, unfortunately, just gone to bed."

Mrs. Cartwright bit her lip with apparent annoyance. "What a nuisance!" she exclaimed sharply. "I

particularly wanted to see him."

"I am sorry"
"Is he asleep?"

The blue eyes had flashed a glance at the second door of the room as if she guessed where it led, that Gerald was beyond it, and would not be unprepared to enter in order to find him.

Marion caught the look, and her face hardened. "I expect he is," she returned rather shortly.

Mrs. Cartwright gazed at her carelessly. Mrs. Holt was too insignificant a person to worry about giving offence to. She knew her—kind, quiet, reserved, timid; a poor thing; merely Gerald Holt's wife.

"Will you see, please?" she said. But it was a command, not a request, and Marion, unseen by the other,

clenched her hands fiercely together.

"Even were he awake," she answered, forcing herself to speak with civility, "my husband could hardly interview

you in his bedroom."

Mrs. Cartwright threw back her shapely head with a sudden rippling laugh of genuine amusement. What a fool this little person was, to be sure! "Cannot interview you!" How delicious!

"My dear woman!" she exclaimed lightly. "Do you

imagine it would be the first time-?"

"I think there is no need," interrupted Marion very clearly, "to go into details of that kind, and I never draw upon my imagination unnecessarily. If you will tell me what matter you wished to see Mr. Holt on, I will speak to him about it in the morning."

Mrs. Cartwright could barely conceal her surprise and irritation at the insignificant little person's suddenly dignified manner. Really, it was absurd the airs these

women tried to assume!

"Oh!" she said languidly, as if the subject was quite above Marion's reach. "It is a private matter—a financial matter——"

"I gathered as much," Marion put in quickly, as the

other paused in search of a stinging remark.

Again Mrs. Cartwright experienced that slight shock of surprise.

"You thought so?" she said sharply. "Pray, how

could you possibly-"

"My imagination," said Marion drily, "is good enough to suppose that the majority of your very particular interviews with gentlemen are due to money matters!"

Something in the manner of saying it, the peculiar tone, made Mrs. Cartwright grasp the full significance of the words, and an angry flush stained the perfect colour of her face.

"Are you trying to insult me, Mrs. Holt?"

Marion's face was very grave and, though pale, very composed. There was no shadow of dislike or repulsion

written in her serious expression.

"That is not my intention, by any means," she answered, meeting the other woman's eyes earnestly. "But when you adopt that tone, Mrs. Cartwright, you must surely expect me to defend myself."

She motioned to the arm-chair by the fire opposite her

own.

"Will you please sit down? We can discuss things sitting quite as well as standing—and I am very tired."

Mrs. Cartwright obeyed reluctantly, almost sullenly. She could not help feeling grossly deceived in her judgment of Gerald Holt's wife. For the first time in her life she

realised that she had met her equal, nay, her superior,

and the sensation was by no means pleasant.

"I am not prepared to discuss anything with you," she said resentfully, as she sank into the chair. "I shall wait until I see Mr. Holt."

"You will wait a long time."

"I think not!"

"I am sure you will," Marion returned calmly. "Mr. Holt is not likely to go out for a week or more; then it will be of necessity, in my company, and on the 14th March we sail for Canada."

"Canada!" It was a gasp of genuine dismay. "For

how long?"

"Six months at least!"

A long silence fell. Mrs. Cartwright, stunned by the unexpected news, sat twisting her embroidered theatre bag between her fingers, not knowing what to do or say. Once she drew out a dainty handkerchief and pressed it to her dry lips; Marion noticed the faint smear of crimson left on it, and decided inwardly that not all the exquisite appearance was purely natural.

"You see," she said, after a time, finding that her visitor made no attempt to speak, "it would be better, under the

circumstances, to tell me what you want."

Mrs. Cartwright raised her eyes, now somewhat drawn and haggard, to the serious face opposite.

"I'll write to him again," she answered defiantly.

"Again?" Marion caught at the word instantly. "You have written to him before?"

"Yes! Three times."

The words were dragged out with an effort. Marion guessed why—guessed the humiliation this woman suffered at confessing, to Gerald Holt's wife of all persons, the fact that she had written and received no reply.

"What do you want money for?"

Mrs. Cartwright started at the outspoken question,

flushing hotly.

"Money? Oh!" She laughed in an attempt at careless indifference. "To meet bills, of course—the rent of the flat, the maids' wages, my gowns——"

"How much is the rent?"

"The rent?" There was no escaping the glance from those steady, dark eyes. "Seventy-five pounds a quarter."

"You seem to cultivate extravagant habits! How much do you owe?"

"Well, really-"

"How much do you owe?"

"Last quarter, and the next is due in a month."

"I see."

Marion turned her eyes away, and sat gazing thoughtfully into the fire. Mrs. Cartwright watched her with barely concealed eagerness. At the end of her funds, desperately in need of money, she wondered how much she could expect, if she could expect anything, from this immovable, unsympathetic woman.

"Who took the flat?" Marion suddenly asked, without

looking round.

"Need you ask? Your husband, of course!"

If she had hoped to see her questioner wince she was disappointed. Not a ripple of emotion disturbed the quiet expression.

"I asked because I wished to know if he was actually responsible in the first place, or you. And who from? I

mean, what agents do you rent it from?"

Afraid to rebel, Mrs. Cartwright answered meekly, readily.

"More & Thomson's of Queen Victoria Street. I have

had it about two years-""

Marion rose from her chair, and, crossing to the small writing-bureau in the window, opened one of the drawers. It belonged to Gerald, and on top of a pile of papers lay his bank pass-book.

She drew it out, and, turning back the pages, came to September of the previous year. Yes, there, sure enough, was the entry: "More & Thomson, £75," and, further

back still in June: "More & Thomson, £75."

With a heavy sigh Marion let the book slide into the drawer, and, taking up a pen, opened her cheque-book. Two she wrote in a firm, decided hand, blotting them carefully when she had finished. Though £200 meant a

considerable sum to them at this time, with so many expenses to meet in connection with Gerald's illness and the proposed journey, there was no sign of hesitation in her manner as she crossed the room towards her visitor.

"You understand, of course," she said, "that you have no legal claim on Mr. Holt, but if the flat is his responsibility he must meet it. This cheque is for the two quarters. By the time the present one expires perhaps you may have found something less expensive, or possibly someone willing to relieve you of such financial burdens in return for the pleasure of your acquaintance!"

Mrs. Cartwright rose, gathering the rich cloak about

her slender figure.

"You are a hard woman, Mrs. Holt!"

"You think so? Personally, I think I am treating you more generously than you deserve. This other cheque is for £50; it will help you to meet your other expenses. At the same time I must assure you it is the last you will receive."

Mrs. Cartwright took the cheques in silence, noting that Marion had taken the precaution to make out the larger one to the agents. She would have liked to fling them in the other woman's face, but she needed money too badly.

Marion waited until the paper was safely deposited in the dainty bag, then, crossing to the door, placed her

fingers on the bell.

"Is that all you have to say to me?" Mrs. Cartwright asked with recovered haughtiness, now that the crisis was

over.

"What else is there to say?" said Marion, as she pressed the bell steadily. "You surely do not expect me to discuss your relations with my husband? Had you been a different type of woman, Mrs. Cartwright, I might have said much—might have found it in my heart to pity you——"

Mrs. Cartwright attempted a laugh, but before the look

on Marion's face it faded into nothingness.

"As it is?" she said, with a faint sneer marring the beauty of her mouth, her eyes hard and scornful. "As

it is," Marion replied gravely, "I would infinitely rather be Gerald Holt's neglected wife than his discarded mistress. I think you have no reason to be proud of your position or to despise mine, which you have tried to show me you do. Ellen!" She turned quietly to the maid, who had entered at that moment. "Please show Mrs. Cartwright out. Good evening, Mrs. Cartwright!"

Defeated and subdued, Pamela Cartwright parted from Marion Holt without a word; and neither saw each other

again after that night.

Marion, left alone, went slowly back to her chair by the fire, sinking wearily into its comfortable depths, pressing

both hands to her aching forehead.

The calmness, the courage with which she had faced this new ordeal were both forced. Now reaction set in, and for some moments she sat battling with her sobs, bitter tears falling from eyes that stared despairingly into the dying fire.

But not for long. After a while the tears were dried, the quivering lips became still. One hand crept up to her breast, drawing from its hiding-place a thin, foreign-

looking sheet of paper—Fortescue's letter.

No need to read it! She knew each word by heart. The mere touch of it in her hand was a charm bringing comfort and hope to her tired spirit, dispelling the memory of every word and action that had so long made her life a misery. One sentence rang in her eyes, uplifting the weary heart: "In God's own country we will make a new man of him!" If that were but possible!

Canada, and a new life! Who could know despair with

such a prospect?

Marion Holt's dreams that night were not of Pamela Cartwright, of broken ideals or false vows, but of rolling hills and plains, of fine, sleek horses and cattle—and moving in the midst of them a vague, shadowy figure that even in her sleep she knew to be John Fortescue.

CHAPTER III

THE few weeks that remained for the Holts in England passed swiftly enough, there being much to do, and in addition they were inundated with callers as soon as it became generally known they were off for a long holiday abroad.

Marie Courtice, highly jubilant and triumphant, instituted herself as a sort of mistress of ceremonies, keeping everybody in a perpetual stir and bustle. As Ellen aptly remarked, "She was always behind you, till your legs were fair run off!"

But Marie was lavish with tips, so the extra work and good-natured scoldings were readily forgiven, and when she offered to take Ellen, about whose welfare Marion was somewhat anxious, into her own service until the latter's

return the girl readily agreed to go.

Marion, none too well after the strain of the past weeks, was infinitely glad of Marie's generous help and advice, glad, too, of her continual cheerful, confident presence. When she was about Gerald, for reasons best known to himself, treated his wife a little more graciously, and less was heard of "her damnable obstinacy over this trip!"

For all his independence there were incidents in his life he would fain keep secret from Marion, and perhaps Marie knew, and might be tempted in a burst of righteous

indignation to reveal them.

Marion, of course, felt nothing of this. She only realised that with Marie calling in at every possible moment life was brighter and easier, and was truly grateful to her stout, good-humoured friend.

At last, to Marion's infinite relief, the 14th March dawned, and, with many tears and waving of handkerchiefs from Marie and Ellen on the platform, London, with all its cares

and bitter memories, was left behind.

Southampton was a familiar town—the Holts having appeared at the principal music-hall there on several

occasions—so, having no wish to look round, and there being little time to spare in addition, they embarked on the *Empress of Scotland* at once.

The trip across the Atlantic was uneventful, and the weather, though cold, fairly good save for one or two slight squalls.

Gerald, still weak and languid, came up on deck when the sun shone for a short stroll, or to read his papers in a chair, otherwise he kept to his cabin or the smoke-room, so that Marion was free for the most part to enjoy the

voyage in her own way.

It being her first trip abroad, life on the great liner was a novelty and a continual source of wonder. They might have been in a wonderfully appointed hotel, so excellent was the accommodation, the catering, and general comfort. Every fine moment she spent on deck, wrapped in her thick travelling-coat, gazing out over the wide expanse of water to the far distance to which they were journeying, but when too cold or wet there was always the beautiful winter garden to sit and chat in, and in the evenings the great ballroom, where one could dance and laugh and sing with a light heart.

Many acquaintances she made, and not a few friends. For the first time in many years Marion had the pleasure of finding people eager to meet her, and the little attentions and courtesies she received from all brought the sparkle back to her eyes and the smiles to her lips that had almost forgotten the art.

But all good things must come to an end. Almost before she was aware of it, they were steaming down the great St. Lawrence river, and morning found them in the docks at Montreal, where, good-byes having been said on allsides, they found themselves alone on the landing-stage, bewildered by the bustle and confusion about them, anxious about their luggage, their berths on the train that was to take them to the end of the journey, feeling truly strangers in a strange land.

But they were not long troubled. "Arrangements will be made this end," wrote John Fortescue, and, sure enough, as they stood, a lean, sharp-featured man, who appeared to be making enquiries of the boat officials, came suddenly

forward towards them, raising his hat.

"Say! am I speaking to Mr. and Mrs. Gerald Holt from London?"

Gerald, who had been looking about for directions, turned quickly at hearing the voice beside him.

"Yes, that's quite correct. I am Gerald Holt." The stranger smiled, holding out his hand.

"Put it there!" he said cordially, smiling anew as he encountered Marion's eager eyes. "My name is Martin T. Werner of New York City and Montreal. Mr. John Fortescue of Lone Star Creek arranged with me by wire to meet your boat. Mr. Fortescue is my very good friend and business client. I reckon that's sufficient introduction."

As the Holts murmured their acknowledgment he added

briskly

"First thing, lunch! This your grip?"

He took possession of their travelling-bags without more ado, and, in a manner that left Marion rather breathless, led the way off the landing-stage to a long, grey car waiting by the pavement.

"Allow me!" He helped Marion in, standing back for Gerald to enter. "No need to look scared, Mrs. Holt; I'm sure no kidnapper, but we've got to look slick if you

want to catch that train."

They had an excellent lunch at the Place Viger Hotel (Martin T. saw to that), but there was little time for talking. Marion managed to enquire if he had seen Mr. Fortescue lately, and if he was well.

"Haven't seen him for months," said Mr. Werner.
"Reckon he's well, though, as he's doing great business."

Gerald looked up from his meal, which he was eating with very poor appetite.

"I can't imagine Fortescue being anything but well; he

was always a great, hefty brute."

"He's sure bigger than that now," Martin T. assured him. "A fine man, fine all through, and the straightest guy ever. Believe me, you'll enjoy your stay out there."

"Is it a big ranch?" Marion asked, leaning forward,

eager for information.

"Big?" He checked himself with a laugh. "Wait and see! It's what we call a stock-farm. Fortescue rears and breaks in horses—cattle as well. Other things, naturally, but not on such a large scale; grows barley, oats, wheat, all

kinds of field roots, and I guess "—the twinkle in his eyes deepened—" you'll find a few chickens Mrs. Holt, if you're fond of poultry. Don't figure on finding a tumbledown shack and a bunch of hooligans. You're sure going out West; but maybe you won't find it so wild and woolly as you imagine. You've got to remember Fortescue's educated and of good stock. There! I'll say no more. You want a few surprises—and I'm wasting time. Ready?"

At Bonaventure Station he gave them final directions as he saw them safely and comfortably seated in the observation car of the Continental Limited, surrounded by newspapers and periodicals, together with a huge box of candy, which he seemed to seriously consider an essential part

towards Marion's enjoyment.

"Don't forget! Sit tight until you reach Edmonton. Then change—it's no trouble—and your station's the first after Mirror. Fortescue will meet you sure. If you don't decide to stay out, I'll be here six months hence to give you a good send-off!"

They parted from Martin T. Werner feeling as if they had

known him all their lives.

Marion found the quick rush across Canada more interesting by far than the boat trip, so varied was the wonderful scenery, so arresting the aspect of the towns and villages through which they passed, but Gerald, after the first day or so, evinced no pleasure at the sights, and by the time they reached Winnipeg and began crossing the hundreds of miles of prairie, vast, lonely stretches of land dotted here and there by solitary homesteads, he had relapsed into his usual fretful, irritable, moody manner, which Marion found so hard to combat or dispel.

It spoilt her delight, her joy in the new surroundings. Where she would have liked to discuss and laugh over the many happy little incidents that occurred during those days, she was forced to keep silent, keep back her rapturous spirits for fear of rousing that violent temper. She knew that in his present state of mind nothing would

annoy him more than to see her excited and joyous.

Only to one could she unburden her mind, a lady travelling in their direction, by name Mrs. Mary Russell, and

with whom Marion became very friendly. Mrs. Russell had lived in Canada from a child, and was ready to point out all outstanding landmarks, and explain them in a manner that the Englishwoman found delightfully interesting

It was this lady who was passing down the corridor on the third morning of their run and who, catching sight of Marion seated on the observation platform, halted suddenly, and, crossing over, came to her side.

"Mrs. Holt!" she said, bending down, with a light

touch on the arm to attract her attention.

Marion looked up quickly, smiling as she saw who it was beside her.

"Mrs. Russell! Oh! Will you sit here?"

She half rose, but Mrs. Russell gently pressed her back. "No, no; I'm not stopping-and you look mighty

comfortable. I just wanted to tell you we are due at Edmonton in half an hour."

"Really?" Marion said, sending an eager glance about "Then we shall soon be at the ranch. I'm so glad!" Mrs. Russell laughed.

"What, tired of the journey? Most people find it

wonderfully interesting."

"So have I," returned Marion quickly. "It has been glorious, but—"

"But you want to get there?"

"Yes!" She drew a long breath, her hands tightly pressed together, as if to hold back some strong inward emotion. "I don't know why. I can't understand it. it's such a strange feeling---'

She paused, raising her eyes to the other woman's face, eyes grown so tragic of a sudden that Mrs. Russell felt not a little startled and perplexed. "I think if anything stopped us getting there it would break my heart!""

'My dear!" Mrs. Russell exclaimed. "You're sure set on it! But don't worry, you'll get there, believe me!"

Edmonton was reached at last, where Marion said good-bye to her friendly companion, who was going on to Athabasca Landing. As Martin T. had stated, they had no trouble in getting a connection, and were soon travelling south on the Calgary branch line.

Lunch-time came and passed. Marion returned to the windows, her eyes divided between the flying landscape and her watch, counting the minutes as the train rushed along. How slow they seemed! How the moments dragged!

Two o'clock. Half-past two! Three—three-fifteen——

"Gerald!" Her voice was shaking with excitement, excitement she could no longer control. "I think we must be nearly there! The train is slowing down, yet there doesn't seem to be any sign of a station in the distance. What a queer country this is!"

"Queer!"

There was bitter emphasis in Gerald Holt's tone as he lowered his paper to answer, disclosing a face equally bitter

in expression.

"Queer!" he repeated savagely. "Of all the Godforsaken holes to be buried in for six months, this is the one! Miles and miles of nothing but grass and hills! I shall go stark, staring mad long before it's time to go back!"

The exaggerated manner had little effect on his wife. She was probably used to the idea of stark, staring madness when her husband was compelled to do anything he objected to.

"Oh, no you won't," she said quietly. "You may like it after you once get used to it. We've never lived in the country, so no doubt it will seem strange at first, but we're going to a big ranch, I mean stock-farm "—remembering Martin T.'s words. "You will find plenty to interest and amuse you."

"Amuse! Ye gods! Rounding up cattle and breaking

in horses! Can you see me doing it?"

Marion broke into an involuntary laugh. The sight of his long, thin, white fingers holding the newspaper, the peevish weakness of the face above it, certainly threw

some doubt on the suggestion.

"No; I'm afraid I can't," she said, traces of a smile still lingering about her lips. "It would require too great a stretch of imagination. Anyway, you will have Mr. Fortescue. It was most kind of him to ask us out when he heard of your illness. We ought to be very grateful, Gerald."

Gerald shrugged his shoulders indifferently as he flung

down the paper with a yawn.

"Oh, I daresay it's six for us and half a dozen for himself. I expect he's thankful to see someone from the civilised world,"he said carelessly. "By Jove! We've passed Mirror."

Marion regarded him in silence, wondering if it was possible for any man to be so utterly unmoved by kindness and sympathy, knowing, even as she wondered, that it was possible with the type of man she had married.

"I wonder if Mr. Fortescue will meet us," she said presently, when she had succeeded in conquering the

natural impulse to answer sharply.

Gerald raised his eyes.

"I should think so. I say!"—this to an attendant passing along the corridor—"are we anywhere near Lone—what is it, Marion?—oh, Lone Star Creek?"

The attendant, a dark-skinned son of the South, showed his teeth, white as his immaculate suit, in a cheerful grin as he paused a moment to answer.

"Lone Star Creek nex' stop, sar! Five minutes, sar!

Jus' seeing to yo' luggage, sar!"

"Thank God for that!" Gerald ejaculated, but his expression was hardly as pious as his words. "I hope Fortescue will think to bring some sort of conveyance to meet us. I expect the place is miles from the station."

The station!

Marion laughed as they drew slowly into a long, wooden shanty roughly built of rude logs, bearing in big white letters the name "Lone Star Creek."

This was the station! How delightful, how fresh it all was! She felt like a schoolgirl at a picnic as she gathered together their rugs and papers and preceded Gerald down the car, ready to give him a helping hand at the door.

She reached it in a moment, walking hurriedly, anxious to get off the train and draw in great draughts of crisp, pure air.

The luggage piled in the road—there being no platform—caught her attention as she prepared to descend, so that for the moment she noticed little else, and was startled by a sound at her elbow, the sound of a clear, confident voice saying calmly:

"Allow me! I guess these steps are a bit awkward for you." A well-shaped, bronzed, firm hand grasped her by the

rm, and in a trice she was standing in the rough, sandy oad watching, with somewhat breathless surprise, a magnificent figure, attired in fawn breeches, soft, sandcoloured shirt, brown top-boots, and enormous widebrimmed hat, assisting her husband from the train.

No need to ask who it was. She knew at once that this nust be John Fortescue, but as he turned to acknowledge her husband's introduction she realised that the description Gerald had given of him as "a great, hefty brute" was

hopelessly wide of the mark.

True, he was hefty, but the tall form, quite six foot one, f not a shade more, was finely proportioned—straight-limbed, deep-chested, with wide, powerful shoulders. The face held nothing of animal brutishness in its outline—every feature clean-cut, perfect. A firm jaw, masterful and determined, a well-shaped, straight nose above a resolute mouth, a broad, low brow crowned with thick, slightly wavy, dark hair, and under it a pair of remarkably keen grey eyes—in good humour sparkling with laughter and life, in anger dark and penetrating, hawklike.

All these things Marion realised in a flash as he turned, holding out his hand—that firm, bronzed hand the strength of which she had felt a moment ago—and gave him her own gladly, warmed by the cheery, sincere smile that lit

the grey eyes surveying her so unruffled and frankly.

"Right glad to meet you, Mrs. Holt," he said heartily, with a glimmer of white teeth showing as he spoke. "I reckon you'll be glad to get up to the house after your journey. Have you enjoyed your trip? . . . Ah, that's good! Gerald, old chap, how are you feeling?"

"Oh, much better, thanks—" began Gerald, with an

answering smile. And Marion added quickly:

"Yes, ever so much better, Mr. Fortescue."
Fortescue sent a swift glance over the wasted face

before him.

"But you need to look better than you do," he exclaimed.
"By all accounts you've had a rough time. Wait a month or two, Gerald—I guess your wife here will hardly recognise you! But I'm keeping you standing. Just give me your wraps, Mrs. Holt, and step up——"

Вт

It was then that Marion noticed the pair-horse buggy standing near by, and her lips parted in an involuntary cry of delight as her eyes rested on the horses.

'Oh, what lovely creatures!" She took a step nearer. " Just look at their coats, Gerald; they are like satin;

Oh, you beauties!"

Gerald, already climbing into the buggy, gave a grunt which might have meant anything.

"Come along, Marion!" he said impatiently. "Do get up. You'll have plenty of time for that sort of thing presently."

Marion immediately dropped her hand, and made to get

up beside him, but Fortescue interposed.

"Here! sit in front with me—you can keep your eyes

on them all the way then !"

He smiled as he helped her up-her admiration had pleased him mightily, for he was justly proud of his animals -and sprang into his seat with wonderful agility for a man of his size, gathering up the reins.

Marion watched his movements, fascinated, as he dexterously turned in the opposite direction and started off, noticing how completely the high-spirited pair of

chestnuts were under his control.

But, if there was no plunging or kicking from the horses, there was plenty of bumping from the rough, uncultivated roads. Within a few seconds Marion fell to wondering if there would be anything left of them by the time they reached the house. She looked at Fortescue, who sat quite unperturbed, handling his pair with superb ease, seemingly unaware of the violent jolting, and at last exclaimed in frank dismay:

"Oh, Mr. Fortescue, are all the roads like this?"

The buggy was rolling from side to side. Fortescue

glanced round, a glint of amusement in his eyes.

"This is good for your liver!" he laughed. "Don't cling so desperately; try and let yourself go with the sway. It's a question of balance. We don't use these things as a rule. Yes, all the roads are rough like this, Mrs. Holt. Can you stand it another twenty minutes?"

"I'll try!" gasped Marion, another bump sending the

words out with a jerk.

After a moment Fortescue asked blithely:

"How's Gerald getting on behind?"

"Rotten!" the gentleman in question called out, overhearing the remark. "Of all the countries—"

The two in front lost the rest, but their eyes met in a

look of mutual understanding.

"He didn't want to come," Marion said half shyly. Fortescue nodded as if he thoroughly understood.

"I guessed that,"—he did not say how—" but do him

a world of good, if he goes steady."

His eyes swept an all-embracing glance over the landscape, with its growing shrubs and newly tilled fields, the rearing hills bathed in afternoon sunshine, and again that glimmering smile touched his lips.

"We'll make a new man of him out here!" he said, and Marion sensed by the tone how glorious, how completely satisfying, was the land of his adoption to this man—

health-giving, hope-giving, the land of promise.

As they turned a corner and dashed up a fairly wide road bounded by a strong fence on each side: "Mr. Werner meet you?" he asked, without looking round.

"Oh, yes, how kind of you to arrange that! I was

feeling hopelessly bewildered when he came up."

"Guessed you would be. I remember how I felt when I landed thirteen years ago. Say! by rights this should be my unlucky year! And you're sitting right here! Superstition is bluff after that! Sure! I was real homesick the day I arrived."

Marion laughed at the unusual manner, the crisp, sharp sentences and exclamations. The laugh made him turn

his head to see what had amused her.

"Are you still homesick?" she said, smiling, yet knowing

in her heart what the answer would be.

He caught the glance, fathomed what she was thinking,

and promptly turned the tables on her.

"Sure!" he cried earnestly. "I've been away from it just about an hour, and I'm getting back again as quickly as these two horses can carry me! I reckon the only home I've any yearning for is the one right before your eyes, Mrs. Holt. Take a peep and tell me how you like it."

CHAPTER IV

From the high seat in the buggy Marion could see over miles and miles of rolling country, quiet, peaceful, silent, drowsily basking in the sun—hundreds of acres of grazingland, newly ploughed fields, and orchards, backed by lowlying hills covered with shrubs and trees, and in the far distance the blue lines of the Rockies looming indistinctly. In the midst of it lay the house, a mere speck in the vast open spaces as Fortescue spoke, but every step of the swift-moving horses brought them nearer, and in a few

minutes they drew up at the gate.

It was a long, one-storied building of considerable size, painted white, with a wide verandah on three sides. The stark bareness was hidden by some climbing creeper of a soft, delicate green colour. In the front were five windows, or, rather, glass doors, two on one side of the entrance, three on the other. All the windows were fashioned thus, opening out to the balcony. The main door was of wood; but thrown back in the daytime, revealing an inner door of thick netting. Three steps led up to it from the garden, which lay before the house, enclosed by a white fence, a flower-garden, beautifully kept, with neat paths and gay, bright-hued plants.

To the left from where Marion sat, though at some distance, were a number of large huts and log cabins, apparently occupied, for the smoke of fires was rising from some of the roofs. Behind these, again at a fair distance, were sundry wooden buildings which she rightly guessed, from

the moving objects among them, were stables.

To the right of the house lay a vegetable-plot, and beyond, fenced in a field of some size, rows of little houses of wood and netting, and, surrounding them on the grass, the chickens Martin T. had mentioned. But not a few! Hundreds—brown, white and black—strutting proudly about and clucking in chorus, as if they knew full well they were the finest in Lone Star Creek, and felt justly conceited about it.

Marion turned slowly in her seat to see what the place could boast behind her, and was confronted by a vision of far-stretching plains; impossible to imagine how far they reached, or how many head of cattle were grazing thereon, and fine, sleek horses. She drew a long sigh as she gazed at it all, and Fortescue, who had been sitting quietly waiting, said:

" Well?"

Marion looked at him, meeting his glance as frankly as he gave it.

"It's perfect! Perfect! But-"

The "but" seemed to break the spell that had fallen

on them, even Gerald, as they sat there.

Fortescue, with a laugh, tossed aside the reins and sprang down, looking up at her from the road with twinkling eyes.

"Trust a woman for finding the one thing lacking!" he exclaimed. "What do you want besides all this?".

"Animation!" she returned promptly. "The house looks dead—unoccupied—"

She had sprung down beside him. Fortescue stepped back instantly, with a quick gesture.

"Look!" he said.

The house door had opened at that moment, and a young Chinese boy attired in light blue trousers and coat poked out his head. Seeing the buggy at the gate, he let out a shrill cry, ran along the verandah and, hanging over the side, called in an equally shrill tone to someone at the back.

"Mister Bob! Mister Bob! Come quickee!"

"Come along!" cried Fortescue to his guests, leading the way up the garden-path, just as the so-styled "Mister Bob" hoved in sight. "Reckon there's still one or two alive, Mrs. Holt."

"Mister Bob" proved to be a fair-complexioned, fair-haired youngster, big made and healthily tanned, with very vivid blue eyes. He was about twenty-six, but against Fortescue's maturer build and superb poise he looked younger even than that. Clean and wholesome in appearance, and evidently not accustomed to the society

of ladies, to judge by the sheepish way he came forward, blushing to the roots of his hair as he saw Marion gazing in his direction.

Fortescue made the introduction in characteristic

fashion.

"Meet my foreman, Bob Walton, Mrs. Holt. Looks shy, but isn't really. Hasn't seen any ladies for years, so guess you'll need to excuse his manners. Bob, Mr. and Mrs. Gerald Holt. You can shake hands with Mrs. Holt if you've washed yours lately!"—this being a sly dig at poor Bob, who was obviously spruced up for the occasion.

With another furious blush that made Marion feel quite sorry for him, Bob availed himself of the kind permission

after a furtive rub or two on his breeches.

He, with the rest of the boys, had learnt of the proposed visit from the boss with sore dismay and disapproval. The thought of having a fashionable woman hanging about the place—any woman from London would naturally come under that heading to them—was singularly distasteful to these sons of the West. They knew they lacked polish, that their speech was appallingly free and unconventional at times, and the idea of a "proud-nosed dame" watching all their movements with contemptuous eyes was terrible to contemplate.

Bob, at that moment, would rather have faced the wildest horse in the hills than the slim, elegantly-clad figure before him, who at first sight looked so unapproach-

able.

Judge, then, of his astonishment when, taking a quick step forward, she gave him her hand—and he marvelled inwardly at the white delicacy of it, as he took it gingerly in his own rough, brown clasp—and, what was better still, a frank, delightful smile, all the more warm because of his shyness and modesty.

"How do you do, Mr. Walton?" she said. . . . And Bob informed the boys later that her voice was sure the prettiest sound he'd ever heard; better'n the creek tricklin' over the stones! . . . "I expect you're simply hating us for—butting in—that's the right word, isn't it?—like this;

but I hope you'll soon get to like us very much, and be

real good friends."

Bob's face was a study. It inwardly convulsed his boss, and even Gerald smiled at the look of mingled awe and admiration directed at Marion.

"Sure!" stammered the boy, uttering a compliment he was unaware of in his simplicity. "You ain't gotta fear

'bout any of us hatin' you!''

"I'm glad to hear that, because you see I mean to learn all about horses and cattle, and these lovely chickens, and I'll want you to show me everything——"

"Gee!"—with a great gulp. "D'you mean—— I—I

didn't guess you'd like horses and such---"

"Why, I love them! And"—she lowered her voice as if she was really taking him into her confidence, making a pal of him from the onset—"I mean to ride one if some of you will show me how."

Bob literally swelled with delight. This was some woman, boy! Gone was all his shyness, his embarrassment. He almost fell over himself in the eager desire to oblige her

in any way.

"Say"—he beamed, his whole face alight with enthusiasm and excitement—"what about startin' right now? Maybe I'd best show you round first, and then—"

But he got no further. A playful blow from Fortescue's

fist sent him reeling backward.

"Get out!" said his boss calmly. "Reckon I can do all the showing that's necessary this trip. Maybe, if you behave, Mrs. Holt will let you run her errands, but don't bank on it too much! In the meantime, if you're wanting a job, take that pair to the stables, and then round up some of those boys I saw down at the station. Mrs. Holt, you're a great attraction, believe me. I saw half a dozen struggling to get a glimpse when you alighted. Ah Wing"—this in an ear-piercing yell to the Chink. "Tea! And step lively! Now, Mrs. Holt, I'll show you to your room. I hope you'll be kind enough to excuse the shortcomings of a bachelor establishment. Gerald, lean on me; you look a bit done up."

He led the way in, and the Holts found themselves in a

very large, square hall covered with straw-coloured matting, the walls cream-washed and hung with Indian knives and serviceable-looking guns.

Opening a door on the right, he ushered them into a sunny room, the one that had two long windows opening on to the verandah, which was to be for their special use.

It was furnished with all the comforts of an English bedroom, but not luxuriously. The wooden bedstead, capacious wardrobe, dressing-table, and wash-stand were of excellent quality mahogany, but very plain in style. The floor was dark stained and highly polished, made warm by gaily coloured rugs, the walls cream-washed like the hall, with one or two pictures of animals and landscape scenes, the curtains at the windows of cheerful cretonne. Marion's quick, appreciative eyes noticed that obviously several things had been added to make for comfort and cosiness, for on the snow-white bed-cover was spread a rich dark blue and gold eiderdown that looked new, and by the windows, stretched to its fullest extent, a long couch of white cane piled with bright, downy cushions.

Everything was in good taste, but simple, yet Marion felt a shock of surprise on entering. She had not expected to find anything so up to date as this, or so perfectly arranged. Even on the dressing-table stood a tall vase full of fresh flowers, flowers chosen from the garden by

someone who had an eye for colour and effect.

"Ah Wing's offering," Fortescue informed her, smiling,

as he saw her eyes rest on them.

"You must tell him they 'lookee velly pletty,' or he will feel upset. Now I'll leave you to have a wash and freshen up after your journey. Tea will be ready in ten minutes or so. If there's anything you want, ring for Ah Wing—he'll get it."

Gerald had flung himself at full length on the wide couch, and was surveying the room critically through half-closed

eves

"I say," he broke out, as the door shut and his wife crossed the room towards him, "old Fortescue seems to do himself well by all appearances. Wonder how much he's worth? I had no idea he had all that ground; and

everything seems thriving. This room is rather decent, you know. I imagined we'd have to sleep on the floor rolled up in blankets!" He laughed a little. "What do you think of it all, Marion?"

Marion made no reply for a moment. She went to one of the windows and looked out at the sweeping plains, the whispering trees glistening in the sunshine, the distant

cattle and horses.

As she stood there a typical cowboy, looking as if he had just stepped from a movie screen, passed along by the garden fence riding his horse as if he had been melted on to it, and away in the house could be heard the voice of Ah Wing and the pleasant tinkle of teacups.

She turned slowly to her husband, and to his surprise the

tears welled to her eyes.

"I feel that this is what I have been wanting all my life," she said, with quivering lips. "I could live and die here!"

CHAPTER V

GERALD HOLT made no reply to his wife's answer in words, but he nevertheless signified his disapproval unmistakably

by closing his eyes and frowning heavily.

Marion could not fail to mark the effect her reply had produced, and it did much towards helping her to conquer the sudden outburst of emotion. With lips slightly compressed she turned away, busying herself with her toilette in silence.

Her attire gave her food for thought, driving out others more unpleasant, and she stood speculating inwardly on what was the most suitable thing to wear in these parts. She had brought a good stock with her, and was inwardly thankful, having seen the house, that most of her gowns were elegant but plain. Nothing elaborate or showy would win approval here, that was certain. She finally chose to wear now a grey dress, very simply made, its only trimming some little knots of green velvet, which matched the string of jade hanging to below her waist.

Fortescue thought it the prettiest thing he had seen for many a long day; but then he was out of touch with the London fashions.

Gerald continued to lie quiet while she was dressing, and, thinking he might have fallen asleep, she went softly to his side when she had finished to make sure. He was not asleep. At her approach he opened his eyes, scanned her carelessly, and said languidly:

"I think I'll stay here, Marion. I feel tired out with that wretched bumping on the roads. You might bring

me in some tea presently."
"Very well," she said quietly, not attempting to persuade him. "I'd stay with you, but it would look rather rude, don't you think, not to have tea with Mr. Fortescue on our first day?"

Gerald yawned, twisting his body more comfortably on

the cushions.

"Oh, he can't expect us to run about after him. But please yourself; I don't want you, anyway," he said, and closed his eyes, obviously giving her her dismissal.

It was unneeded. At the words and action Marion turned abruptly and left him. Sometimes she found it almost impossible to endure his utter selfishness in silence. Only her horror of scenes checked the hot answers on her lips.

Passing out of the room, she found herself once more in the square hall opposite another door. Not knowing quite what to do or where to go, she tapped on it gently, but, getting no answer, turned the handle and went shyly in.

It proved to be the living-room, one nearly twice the size of the one allotted to them, with three long windows hung with cretonne curtains. The floor was similarly stained and polished, but the rugs were fashioned from beautiful animal skins. A substantial-looking diningtable occupied the centre, and near the wide, open fireplace stood a couple of comfortable deep-seated leather chesterfield chairs. There were several others of light cane like the couch in their room, a businesslike-looking desk, a very large bookcase crammed with books, and a standard lamp with a many-coloured beaded shade.

A cheerful fire blazed on the hearth, and the table was laid for tea. Marion's feminine eyes noted instantly the snow-white texture of the cloth, the dainty china, the rich scarlet anemones in the centre. Surely, she thought, there must be some woman on the premises responsible for all this order and detail. Then she broke into a low laugh, remembering Marie's idea of life on a ranch—drinking out of pewter mugs, sitting on benches, etc.—and wondered what she would say could she but see this delightful room.

As she stood thus thinking the door suddenly opened and Ah Wing, the little Chinese boy, pattered in with a heavily-

laden tray.

He paused irresolute as he saw the white woman standing there, glancing at her furtively out of the corners of his almond-shaped eyes, too proud to retreat, yet too shy to go forward. Marion was equally perplexed and not a little embarrassed. Fresh from London, with no knowledge of the Oriental, she hardly knew what to say, but she was more.

naturally courteous and pleasant, and she spoke to him as she had spoken to Bob Walton, with quiet friendliness, smiling.

"Are you Mr. Fortescue's boy?"

The dark eyes glanced upwards, there was a moment's hesitation, and then a quick nod.

Marion smiled again, taking a step nearer.

"Won't you put the tray down? It looks very heavy."
He obeyed silently, but made no attempt to go, having done so. Marion had an idea that in his heart he was slightly curious, and was waiting for her to add something

Remembering Fortescue's words, she leant forward, touching the scarlet anemones with her fingers.

"You pick these, Ah Wing?"

A glimmer of interest lit the boy's otherwise impassive face.

"Velly nice, eh?" he said.

Marion nodded, as he had done, in agreement, and, pointing towards her own room, said:

"You pick some for me?"

She had touched the right chord this time, for:

"You likee velly much?" he asked eagerly. "You likee Ah Wing's little flowers he pick for lady come over sea?"

The liquid voice, lilting and soft, delighted Marion's musical ear, and his quaint trousers and coat were equally pleasing to her artistic sense. Anxious to praise him, she clasped her hands together, raising her eyes as if intoxicated with pleasure.

At that a broad smile flashed across his face.

"Boss say pletty lady come—makee place all nicee—all clean—makee nicee cake—say pletty lady want to stay—makee long stop if all nicee——"

Marion's smile deepened as she listened, her eyes begin-

ning to dance with fun.

"Perhaps the boss will change his mind," she said, guessing that any reference to Fortescue would effectively loosen the boy's tongue. "Perhaps he'll say pletty lady not so pletty, not nicee! Hope she won't stay long time!"

He gave her another swift glance, his head a little on one side, half doubtful as to whether she was serious or only teasing him.

"Ah Wing thinkee you velly pletty; Ah Wing velly

clever boy like that !"

He paused a moment, considering something in his mind, bringing it out finally with a touch of triumph.

"Boss say he know you velly nicee by letter! Know

he likee you velly much."

He broke off abruptly in the midst of his revelations as the door opened and Fortescue, spick and span from a good tubbing, and now attired in a dark lounge-suit, faultlessly cut, strode in.

Immediately the smile faded, and Ah Wing, lowering his eyes, hurriedly picked up his tray and made to depart.

"There!" exclaimed Marion impulsively, half vexed, for she had been finding his remarks singularly interesting. "You've scared him, Mr. Fortescue! We were just getting on friendly terms when you came in; now he's running away!"

Fortescue raised his eyebrows, laughing broadly.

"Reckon I butted in at the wrong moment!" he said, surveying the pair before him with amused eyes, thinking what a contrast they presented—truly a living picture of East and West. "Tea all ready, Ah Wing? That's right!" He laid a kindly hand on the boy's shoulder as he passed. "Ah Wing velly good tea-maker, Mrs. Holt. Ah Wing velly good boy all round!"

"Velly good boss, velly good boy!" said Ah Wing impassively. But Marion caught the upward look accompanying the words, and sensed something of the devotion Fortescue inspired in his men, the full depth of which she

was to realise later.

She waited until the door was closed.

"What a quaint answer!" she said smiling, as Fortescue

came to the table.

"Quaint? I suppose I'm used to his way of answering. Take it from me, it's logical! If men tell me their boys give them trouble I look at the boss, not the boy. They respond to treatment, good or bad, very readily. You can trust Ah Wing, Mrs. Holt, he's a very good boy. But

where's Gerald?" he added, looking round in some surprise.

"Doesn't he want any tea?"

"Oh, yes! But, if you will excuse him, he would like to rest awhile. I will take some in to him presently; I

expect he will have a nap first."

"Sure! Just do as you like in everything, Mrs. Holt. You must remember this is your home now." He drew up a chair to the table for her, seating himself opposite. "Gee!" he finished, drawing a deep, appreciative breath. "This looks real homelike already! It sure makes some difference with a woman about!"

Marion looked up in astonishment from the teapot she had quite naturally taken possession of. "Are there no

women on the ranch then, Mr. Fortescue?"

"Nope! Plenty down town, but none on my land."

He watched her eyes travel round the room, a glint of amusement in his own as he marked the obvious bewilderment.

"But it all looks so neat!" she exclaimed finally.

He laughed openly at that.

"Neatness being an impossible virtue among men! Wal, maybe it's neater than usual. You can guess there's been a grand upheaval since your wire! The house has been literally turned upside down and scrubbed from top to bottom. Even the boys caught the fever, and their huts have been through a similar process. Tommy Brennan—you will like Tommy, Mrs. Holt; he's little but he's cute—said 'we was sure heading for ruination by being so extravagant with the cleaning!' So, you see, we're not always in such apple-pie order. How do you like everything?"

Marion, remembering, tried to put her deep gratitude towards this man into words. They were none the less fervent that they were faltering and choked with emotion.

"What trouble we have given you, Mr. Fortescue! I would like to tell you how very grateful I—we are to you. I am sure we can never repay your kindness. Your invitation came just at the right moment—"

She broke off with a slight quiver of the lip, and at once

Fortescue put in resolutely:

"I reckon we won't say any more on that point, Mrs. Holt. I was sure glad to have you here, and, if anything, the obligation is on my side." He paused to drink his tea and give her time to recover. Then, after a moment: "Now tell me the trouble about Gerald. What's wrong with him? You said something in your letter about his heart—"

Marion nodded, and he saw the deepening of the shadow

in her eyes.

"Yes, it is his heart. The doctors say it has always been very weak, though we never knew. Of course he has never taken care, worked hard, with very little rest, and the climax was bound to come. We had a terrible time when he collapsed. I thought he would never pull round—"

There was a wonderful look of sympathy on Fortescue's face as he watched her. He had speculated many times as to what his friend's wife would be like, and, having seen her, he was more than satisfied. She was so different from the only women he met down town, with her refined daintiness and composed manner. But the face puzzled him. What was that expression? Was it unhappiness, trouble, worry? Ah! no doubt her husband's illness and his continued weakness was causing her much anxiety.

"Don't you think it would be as well if he gave up the stage business?" he asked gently, with a desire to help.

"It must be some strain on him."

"I wish he would!" The cry made Fortescue's smooth brow contract sharply. "It is a strain for both of us, Mr. Fortescue, and will be worse in future, with this hanging over us. But I can't persuade him. I have given up long ago."

"What's the great attraction?"

He put the question casually, seemingly absorbed in demolishing his generous helping of corn-cakes, but he was well aware, nevertheless, of the sudden flood of colour in the pale cheeks and the hesitating embarrassment of the reply.

"Oh, he likes the life—the excitement. He's—he's rather fond of having a good time, and—and there are

plenty of opportunities for enjoyment. Besides, there's the money question."

Fortescue raised his eyes.

"I figure you make plenty at that game——" he put in.
"Yes, we draw big money, but——" Again that fatal hesitancy. "It goes, somehow!"

"It does, if you spend it!" he laughed easily.

The lightness of the words, the whimsical look, reassured her. She had been afraid he might think that Gerald——

She under-estimated Fortescue's intelligence there. He had learnt an astonishing amount in the last few seconds, for, truth to tell, he had not been very favourably impressed by his first sight of Gerald Holt.

Fortescue was no milk-sop. From letters that had passed he could make a pretty shrewd guess at the causes of the breakdown, and knew for certain now that he had not fallen very wide of the mark. If he had made a mistake

it was in judging too lightly.

But it was not his way to make any comment or appear curious, whatever he thought, also he sensed that she was not at ease on the subject. Strange that from the first moment he felt a desire to protect this woman, though he was by no means a ladies' man. So far, the opposite sex had failed to deeply interest or stir his pulses in the slightest.

He turned the conversation very naturally in another

direction.

"Don't worry! He'll soon get all right out here. Now, what would you like to do this evening? You'll find we keep early hours as a rule, but I guess there's time to show you round a bit before dark. How do you like the house?"

Marion looked at him as he leaned his elbows on the table, the smile returning to her lips in response to the

irresistible twinkle in the grey eyes opposite.

"It's lovely! What I've seen of it."

"Good! I hope the rest will be as satisfying. Anything like you thought it would be? Come! you must have speculated as to what you would find!"

"I hadn't the faintest idea. Well"-she laughed a

little—" perhaps I imagined an old log cabin—"

"And found?"

She looked round, with a quick, indrawn breath.

"The house of my dreams!" she said, with a sudden break in the low tone.

The answer seemed to startle Fortescue. The laughter died out of his face as he regarded her a moment with strange intentness. Then:

"The house of my dreams," he repeated slowly, and rose

from the table, crossing to the desk.

Marion watched him a trifle apprehensively, feeling the change in his manner, and wondering if she had said anything that he resented. But he turned almost instantly,

pipe in hand.

"That's a real compliment," he said, smiling. "And I'm glad it comes so near your ideal. I've tried to make it attractive, as far as a man can. When I've visited other houses I've made notes and watched how things were done. I'll be glad if you will suggest any improvements, Mrs. Holt, during your stay."

"There is nothing to alter," she returned softly. "It's just right as it is. By the way, how many rooms are there? It looks a large house for "-her eyes danced-

"a lonely bachelor!"

"Seven. Four bedrooms, this sitting-room, a kitchen, Ah Wing's domain, and, in addition, a small bathroom. I mention this last on account of its rarity! I can't promise you hot and cold by turning a tap, but Ah Wing can draw you plenty from the spring and warm it if necessary."

"It's wonderful!" said Marion, getting up from her chair and walking to the window. "And, if you will forgive me asking, is some of this ground yours? I can see these fields are, they are so beautifully cultivated, but how much besides?"

"I own two sections," said Fortescue, drawing near. "Two sections? I'm afraid I don't understand the meaning of sections-"

He laughed at that.

"Wal, about thirteen hundred acres."

"Thirteen hundred! Why, I should have thought twenty a lot! I suppose we are not used to thinking in acres. I've only a vague idea now as to how much land is comprised in thirteen hundred."

Fortescue looked highly amused at her dubious expression.

"See here," he said quickly, "a section, 640 acres, is about a square mile, which means my land measures just double. Is that clearer?"

"Two square miles! Yours!" The quick gasp betrayed her astonishment. "Oh! I never dreamt—and all those horses and the cattle?"

Fortescue's eyes followed the direction of hers.

"All mine," he said quietly. "Roughly 4,000 head of cattle and about 550 horses. I raise stock pretty extensively, you see." Adding, as he noted her unconcealable surprise and wonder: "You'll soon get used to thinking in hundreds and thousands. Living in crowded streets and cramped towns narrows one's outlook. Out here there's plenty of space to enlarge your views. Where you talked of a yard you'll soon talk of a mile as—"

He broke off as there came a knock at the door, and

turned quickly.

"Come in! Oh, it's you, Brandon."

The newcomer paused in the doorway as he saw the lady by the windows and instinctively removed his hat, which saved a heap of trouble, as Fortescue would doubtless have relieved him of it without first asking his permission had he not done so.

He was a typical rancher, well built and bronzed, but his looks were spoilt by the thick, sensual lips and black eyes over-bold and daring. Yet he assumed on entering an air of seeming modesty quite out of keeping with his general appearance, and stood with downcast eyes while Fortescue, after a word of apology to Marion, made his enquiries relative to the dispatching of some cattle by rail.

When the matter was concluded, which was in a very few minutes, Brandon turned to go. He had, in fact, a

hand on the door when his boss called him back.

"By the way, Brandon, this is Mrs. Holt, who will be staying here with her husband for some months as my guests."

There was a certain amount of emphasis on the last three

words, which Brandon seemed to understand, if one could judge by the swift glance he threw at Fortescue, followed by another in Marion's direction, accompanied this time by a rough salutation, and which she acknowledged by a quiet but distant inclination of the head; for she had not been very prepossessed by the man's general appearance.

"I expect the boys to have the greatest consideration and respect for Mr. and Mrs. Holt," Fortescue added, with a look that spoke louder than words. "And to be ready to do anything they require, as if it came direct from me.

You understand me, Brandon?"

"Certainly, boss!"

"Right! You can get along now."

With another rough gesture, Brandon stumbled out, and in another moment they saw him walking down the garden-path.

Fortescue reflectively relit his pipe, took two or three puffs at it, and looked across at Marion with a touch of

seriousness in his manner.

"That's the only boy in my bunch I can't cotton on to, Mrs. Holt, and I'd like you to keep out of his way as much as possible, not because he's likely to be insolent—he knows me too well to try any tricks—but I don't trust him or like his ways. He works pretty well, and I've no reason to dismiss him, but he's too fond of the town for one thing, and sometimes I hear rumours that set me thinking. There's a pretty girl in the saloon down there—I'll tell you more of her later—and he's mighty fond of hanging about in that quarter. I keep my eyes skinned, but so far he's proved slippery. They're a rough lot out here, Mrs. Holt, so I'd be glad for you to depend on me, or Bob Walton, for a guide if you need one. You can trust Bob—he's one in a thousand!"

"I thought he looked a nice boy," said Marion shyly.
"Sure!" Fortescue laughed. "But don't be deceived!
He looks as gentle as a dove, but he's real tough! You'd
find a bullet through your wrist before you could get a
hand on your gun, believe me! Now"—with a quick
change of tone—"I'll see to one or two jobs while you get
Gerald some tea; then I'll show you round. So long!"

CHAPTER VI

It was always John Fortescue's habit to rise early, but the next morning following the Holts arrival he was literally up with the lark and working hard at his desk in the sitting-room before six o'clock. For more than an hour he kept busy, writing letters, signing cheques, and making up his accounts. Then, as the clock on the mantelshelf struck seven, he threw down his pen with a sigh of relief, closed his desk, and, getting up, made his way to the kitchen.

Ah Wing had just put in an appearance, and glanced up from his fire-making in mild surprise at seeing the boss so early in that quarter. Fortescue soon enlightened him as to the reason.

"Ah Wing," he said in an undertone, "take Missie Holt tea and biscuits in half an hour—all nicee—savvy?"

"Allight!"

The tone was non-committal, but Fortescue caught the bright glint in almond eyes, and turned away satisfied

that the order would be implicitly obeyed.

It was a peerless morning, and he went his rounds with a whistle of delight on his lips, the outward expression of a man thoroughly content with his surroundings and his life, for, truth to tell, he would not have changed his lot

for any consideration one could offer.

He had tasted the joys of the open country, knew the pleasure that could be derived from the perfect pictures of sunrise and sunset, the songs of the birds in spring, the light of the rich grain ripening in summer, the snow spread like a carpet on the landscape and the swollen rivers of winter-time, the complete satisfaction only the rancher can feel as he looks at his well-fed cattle, his fine, sleek worses.

He called it God's country, and it meant just that to John Fortescue. As he had said to Mrs. Holt last evening while showing her the house:

"I guess God's everywhere, but I reckon if He couldn't be He'd sure settle in some spot like this. I remember a hymn my aunt used to sing, something about 'Oh! breath of God, breathe on us now.' I sure feel it when those winds come sweeping across the plains!"

He felt it now as he moved towards the house, and, lifting his wide hat, he let the breeze ruffle the crisp, dark hair and caress his brow with gentle touch like a woman's

soft kiss.

Yet, in the midst of his content, he had never been more conscious than he was this morning, as his eyes strayed to the windows of the room where Marion Holt lay sleeping, of the one thing lacking in his life, and, as he paused a moment with his hand on the garden-gate, he asked himself in all seriousness: why had God, who revealed such marvellous foresight and intelligence in all things pertaining to Nature, given into Gerald Holt's keeping this precious gift, while he, John Fortescue, was left desolate; for he knew in the depths of his clean soul that there would have been no shadow in the clear eyes of any woman whose happiness had depended on him.

He replaced his hat with a faint sigh as he thought of

it, and then laughed.

"My boy," he said inwardly, "you're moralising! I reckon you're wanting a good breakfast. Get in with

vou!"

He experienced a slight shock as he opened the livingroom door, for Gerald, looking less fatigued, was sitting by the long windows reading, and Marion, in a neat navyblue skirt and plain white blouse, the workmanlike look of which won Fortescue's instant approval, stood arranging the breakfast-table.

Say," he exclaimed, throwing down his hat, "you've stolen a march on me, I reckon. Hope you both slept well. How do you feel, old pal? You look better

already."

With a flash of a smile as he passed Marion, he crossed the room and flung himself into a chair beside Gerald, running a keen glance over him.
"Oh, fair!" answered Gerald, laying his book down.

"I can't say I feel like breaking in horses yet, but I had a decent night——"

"And feel all the better for it? Good! Mrs. Holt,

what about you?"

Marion looked up, laughing frankly.

"I'm afraid I slept like a top! Ah Wing woke me when he brought the tea, otherwise I might have been there now!"

"Lucky for us he didn't forget his instructions! I hope

it was 'all nicee.' "

"Say," she returned, and even Gerald smiled at the quick imitation of Fortescue's slight twang. "There was some spread, boy!—tea, biscuits, corn-cakes, and a nose-gay!" And she held up a small bunch of flowers that

had been lying beside her plate.

"Gee!" said Fortescue helplessly, with a comical look. "You're sure leading my boys astray already! Reckon I said nothing about corn-cakes or flowers. Ah Wing, you villain," as the familiar yellow face and blue jacket came through the doorway, "who told you to take corn-cakes and flowers to Missie Holt?"

"No one, boss !"

"No one? Then why the-"

Ah Wing drew himself up with great dignity.

"Boss he say, make all nicee! He say, takee missie tea, biscuits—half-hour. Ah Wing thinkee long time, thinkee more than boss—thinkee Missie Holt eatee corncake las' night, say velly nicee, say little flowers velly pletty, likee velly much. Ah Wing takee both so Missie Holt makee long stop. Ah Wing more long brainee than boss!"

The tone and manner were irresistible. With a great shout of laughter, in which the others joined, Fortescue shook his fist threateningly after the retreating figure.

"You wait till I catch you, Ah Wing!" he called. "I'll give you 'long brainee'! There! that's the way they'll treat me, Mrs. Holt, now you're here—rank insubordination!"

Marion, still laughing delightedly, beckoned them both to the table and began to pour out tea.

"Come along, you two, breakfast is quite ready. Don't look so down-hearted, Mr. Fortescue; I promise not to

encourage any of them!"

The breakfast was of excellent quality—deliciously fried bacon and new-laid eggs, crisp, hot buttered toast, and freshly brewed tea or coffee—and they partook of it very heartily, Gerald in particular eating with more appetite than he had ever known before.

He was in better spirits too, and chatted quite amiably, finding as he did in Fortescue a ready and sympathetic listener. He was careful to keep control of his temper on this first morning, and Marion saying little he had no occasion for resentment, and the meal passed pleasantly enough. Fortescue, glancing across once or twice at his friend's wife, saw with satisfaction that she looked brighter and more cheerful than she had done last night.

They had just risen from the table when Bob Walton, sleeves rolled up to the elbow and looking very hot, burst

in in a state of great excitement.

"It's here, boss!" he blurted out, without pausing to think. "The dandiest little—"

"Quit!" Fortescue snapped. "What did I tell you, you weak-kneed son of a—"

Walton stopped short, blushing furiously, and snatched

the wide hat from his fair head.

"Er-mornin', Mrs. Holt. Sorry, boss! Say, y'

"Bob, if you say another word you're discharged right away! Mrs. Holt, let me get my word in before he spoils things altogether. You see "—in answer to her surprised, enquiring glance, "it's like this. We've planned a little surprise for you—due to something you said when you arrived. It's outside, but I want you to be blindfolded, so as to give you a nice little shock. Gerald, just tie a handkerchief over your wife's eyes, will you?"

Gerald, decidedly curious, drew out his handkerchief

as requested, but it proved too small.

"This one won't tie," he said quickly, after making a second attempt. "Have you something bigger, Fortescue?"

Fortescue felt in his breast pocket, drawing out his own. "Here we are!" he returned cheerfully. "Turn round, Mrs. Holt, while I fix it. Don't look so startled; you'll like it, believe me!"

Marion laughed, and stood in front of him like an obedient

child.

Immediately something soft was laid across her eyes, blotting out the room, and Fortescue's fingers were fumbling about her head as he tied the knot. It took him a second or two to adjust it, for his hands were not accustomed to such delicate work, and it was a little bewildering to feel the soft strands of hair twining about his fingers. There was an unusual touch of colour in his face as he said suddenly:

"That's done the trick! Now, take my hand. Gerald,

lead the way, please."

Marion felt her hand grasped in a tight, firm grip and went forward blindly, instinctively keeping close to her

companion for guidance.

Across the room and the passage, down the steps very carefully and slowly. For a man ordinarily so brisk and alert, Fortescue was taking almost an unnecessary time over the brief walk. Perhaps the touch of the soft hand lying in his so trustingly was an inducement to lingering.

Through the garden, and out at the gate, a sharp ex-

clamation from Gerald, and her hand released.

"Can I look?" she said breathlessly, putting up both

hands to the bandage.

"Yes, that's better. Bob, don't move for your life! Now, Mrs. Holt——"

The fingers so shook with excitement that Fortescue had again to come to her assistance in untying the handkerchief.

A second, a brief pause, and then:

" Oh!"

On a little raised patch of grass, right before her eyes, stood a perfect specimen of a horse, a rich, sleek chestnut with snow-white stockings and a diamond of white on his forehead like a star.

He looked round at the delighted cry, tossing his silky

mane, giving a quick stamp with his foot and proud lift of the head, as if fully aware of the picture he presented.

"Oh, Mr. Fortescue, it can't be for me!"

Fortescue smiled down into the flushed, wondering,

upturned face.

"It sure is!" he said calmly. "You said you wanted to ride, didn't you? As soon as you made that remark I thought of this horse; he belongs to a neighbour; and I knew he wanted to sell. I wired last night, and it arrived this morning. Come and make friends with him!"

Marion went forward, too moved to utter a word of thanks, but her eyes were eloquent, and Fortescue felt

more than repaid for his trouble.

He watched her petting it in silence, listening with appreciative ears to the little crooning words and exclamations that broke from her lips.

"Don't you want to get up?" he asked after a moment.

"Oh, could I? I would love to—"
"Stand still." He had forgotten Gerald standing near. "Now then. One! Two!" At the "Three!" his hands gripped her round the waist, lifting her high into the saddle without any apparent effort.

"Miss Diana!" he laughed, with that flash of white teeth, and swept his hat low before her in an extravagant

bow.

"Bravo!" cried Bob Walton, delighted out of his shyness. "How d'you like it, Mrs. Holt?"

Marion, breathless and happy, hardly knew yet.

"I feel so high up!" she smiled back. "Gerald, how do I look?"

What need to ask, with one man's eyes telling her all too plainly? She blushed hotly under the direct gaze of those grey orbs, and, taking the reins from his outstretched hand, dared to walk the animal up and down a few paces, slowly, before them.

Even Gerald had to admit that she looked well in her trim skirt and blouse, with the unusual glow of happiness in her cheeks. Marion Holt's quiet beauty was of the type that triumphs over every situation and the petty details of fashion.

"Not so bad!" her husband called back. "Who do you suppose is going to look after it for you? I hope you won't expect me to rub it down, etc.—"

"Mr. Walton will!"

The prompt retort made Bob blush again—this time with

pleasure. Fortescue roared.

"Bob, it's a case! Mrs. Holt, you promised not to encourage them. I figure I'll have no boys left soon if you hand out smiles like that!"

Gerald had drawn near, and was engaged in examining the horse. He looked up as Fortescue stopped, saying,

with unusual warmth:

"I say, it's awfully good of you, Fortescue. You couldn't have pleased Marion better; she's mad on animals; and this is certainly a beauty. It must have cost you a pretty penny."

Fortescue removed his glance from the pacing animal

with some reluctance.

"Oh, I've not settled for it yet; I got it on approval——"Another man in Gerald's position would have stepped in then and insisted on paying for his wife's mount himself, remembering all that this man was doing for them in other directions. Not so Gerald. If Fortescue liked to pay—well, let him! Besides, they would have to part with it when they returned to England. A likely thing to lay out some hundreds on a horse for the sake of a few months, and probably sell at a loss!

All he said was:

"She looks as if she means to stick to it!"—and

laughed easily.

"I'll be real glad if she does," replied his friend, the sincerity of the wish echoing in his voice and revealing what a minor consideration the cost was in comparison with the pleasure the gift would give. "Take it from me, that's some horseflesh there!"

Then, as if something occurred to him, in a quick change

of tone:

"Say, Mrs. Holt, would you care to see a wild horse broken in this morning? What do you say, Gerald?"—as Marion gave a ready assent.

"Oh, no, thanks!" returned Gerald, with an indifferent shrug. "I shall have a chair out here and read my letters.

I'm not keen on that sort of thing."

"Right!" said Fortescue, unperturbed. "Make yourself at home. There's plenty of refreshment and smokes in the sitting-room, and Ah Wing will bring you anything you require. Mrs. Holt, just wait one minute!"

He strode off briskly in the direction of the stables, and Bob also moved away stealthily, not liking to intrude on

the visitors.

"You're sure you'll be all right if I go with Mr. Fortescue, Gerald?" Marion asked, looking down at her

husband with kindly eyes.

"Oh, good lord, yes!" was the prompt, impatient retort. "I wish you wouldn't worry yourself so much about me; I'm not a silly kid, or a cripple! I shall manage

to amuse myself without you, I daresay."

Marion closed her lips tightly. After all, what was there to say? Surely it was best to let him go his own road, and keep silent. But the shadow was back on her face when Fortescue reappeared in a few moments astride another magnificent creature, Marquis, his own particular

horse and inseparable companion.

His quick eyes marked the change in Marion's expression, and a shrewd glance followed Gerald into the house, but he made no comment. With a quick smile, a little warmer than usual, he began to exhibit Marquis to her admiring gaze, told her his history, and made her pet him as she had done her own, then, mounting, fell in beside her, one hand on the bridle of her horse, chatting pleasantly and giving her first instructions in horse-riding. Marion proved an apt pupil, and she was entirely free from nervousness, which helped her considerably. Before long she was sitting fairly comfortably, and with enough ease to take an interest in the scenery her companion pointed out as they went slowly along.

They had not far to go. In a very short time they came to a clearing behind the stables of some considerable size,

enclosed by a high wooden fence of stout make.

On and around this same fence were gathered a crowd

of cowboys, of all shapes and sizes, gazing at, and passing remarks on, a horse that was tethered by a good strong rope to the palings. Deeply absorbed they were, but several of them apparently caught the sound of the approaching hoofs and looked round, giving the word to the others by sundry kicks and nudges, whereat, finding something more uncommon to look at, they stood furtively, but nevertheless respectfully, eyeing the lady as she drew near.

Marion naturally felt not a little embarrassed in this strange company, but Fortescue soon put them all at ease.

"Say, boys," he said cheerily, "you'll have to show what you're made of this morning, sure enough! Mrs. Holt here wants to see that horse broken in—she's come along expressly for that purpose. But you'll have to be careful! Mrs. Holt knows just how to handle a horse! Believe me, this animal "—he indicated it with his hand, eyes dancing with fun that found a reflection in the boys' grinning faces—" arrived this morning buck-jumping like a bronk, but since she handled it it does any trick you mention!"

Marion's whole-hearted enjoyment of the joke won the

boys completely.

"Now," Fortescue added, still laughing, "about this pony. Who's going to be the first to tackle him?"

Silence and sheepish looks for a moment, then:

"Tommy Brennan!" called out one bolder than the rest.

Instantly a deafening shout of laughter went up, in which Fortescue joined, for Tommy Brennan was the smallest of the party, almost a dwarf, and the idea of him tackling the wild-looking creature before them was too comical for words.

Tommy resented the laugh, and fell upon the speaker in a fury of rage which heightened the fun considerably, as the man who had spoken was as large as Tommy was small. Order was only restored after much raising of dust and sprinkling of swear words, Tommy being forcibly suppressed and held prisoner by two of his pals.

Fortescue looked at Marion, so sedately watching the

commotion, with a twinkle of amusement.

"A wild lot, Mrs. Holt!" he said apologetically, but looking as if he thoroughly enjoyed their high spirits for all that.

"I think they are delightful!" Marion protested.

"Look, there's one getting over the fence!"

It was Brandon, the rancher who had called up at the house the previous evening. He had a saddle in his hand, and was letting himself carefully down into the enclosure, making for the farther corner where the horse was tied.

It saw him coming and lashed out furiously, dragging at its rope as if it would tear the man to pieces, could it

but reach him.

Brandon went warily, skilfully, saddle in hand, trying to get near enough to throw it on the animal's back, but it fought so vigorously that he was forced to keep his distance.

Again he tried, and again failed. Then, rendered badtempered, he snatched up a thick stick and struck it savagely, forgetful of everything save that he was baulked in his purpose. Immediately Fortescue's voice rang out.
"Quit that!—and clear!"

Marion looked up startled. Could that frowning, tightlipped, stern-eyed man beside her be the laughing John Fortescue of a moment ago—and that sharp, stinging voice his?

It was. She knew it as he turned his head to speak to her.

"No man does that to a horse of mine," he said quietly, but in a tone that showed he was not in the habit of being trifled with. "If I catch him at it again he goes for good."

His glance met hers, saw the approbation in the dark eves, and turned away satisfied. It was a delightful sensation to find himself so clearly understood and sympathised with. Brandon gave them a dark look as he clambered back over the fence. It was not the first time he had been reprimanded, but he resented it the more that it had occurred under this woman's eyes.

A second man entered the enclosure, proving equally unsuccessful. A third took his place, who managed to get the saddle on, but in an attempt to fasten the straps he received a kick, and several others had to go in and carry

him away, groaning heavily.

"Getting scared?" Fortescue asked quickly, as he heard the gasping breath of the woman who was watching with him.

"No, not very-only its rather horrible, isn't it? The

poor thing so longs for its freedom."

"That's so! We all do; but sooner or later we have to get into harness and knuckle down to working for a living. He'll be as happy as a sandboy in a little while. The harness is the trouble; he's been ridden without it; but he kicks against the leather."

He relapsed into silence as another took a hand, noting with keen eyes the fruitless effort, then suddenly he leapt

from his horse.

"Where are you going?" Marion asked sharply.

"Only to see what impression I can make on him!" he laughed up at her.

"But you'll get hurt!"

"Guess again!" he retorted lightly, and was gone before she could protest further.

A rousing cheer went up from the boys as the boss neared the fence, but Marion had no ears for it. She was too intent on watching that tall form to heed the others.

With a fine spring he vaulted the rails easily, dropping lightly down on the inner side. Leisurely strolling, he skirted the enclosure and took a stand near the animal, close enough to be seen, but far enough away to make

kicking of negligible importance.

The horse threw back its head viciously as it saw him, and backed, pawing at the ground as if it would like to be trampling his body. Fortescue waited patiently until its first frenzy was over, then he drew a little nearer, holding out his hand persuasively, saying something in a low tone which Marion could not hear.

His object was to get close, but for a long time he was unsuccessful, and only his agility saved him from mishap on several occasions. Gradually, by soothing words and firm perseverance, he won through, and the animal stood still, allowing him to stroke its neck and caress it.

But to saddle it was another matter. The horse knew what he was after well enough, and time and again Fortescue retreated to avoid a fearful lunge from a revengeful hoof, until at last man's eye proved quicker, man's brain more alert than the animal's, and by a sudden,

unexpected move he got the leather on its back.

Then again the low, soothing words, the outstretched hand, the gradual drawing closer. The rolling, bloodshot eyes watched him unceasingly, with suspicion and distrust, the foot was raised often ready to strike, but the soft tone, the quiet gentleness, was like music, charming and subduing the wild spirit. Never had it known the touch of a man's hand on its quivering neck, never had it been fondled, petted as this man petted it. There was magic in the art.

It stood quite still while the saddle was adjusted properly and the rope untied, intellect a little dulled in the strange delight of the moment. Then Fortescue's voice rang out.

"Stand clear; and open the gate when I shout!" And instantly, taking advantage of the momentary lull, he was on the animal's back.

Then came the real tussle between man and beast. It seemed to Marion, as she watched with sickening heart, that it could never be possible for a man to stay on that rearing, plunging, tearing, four-footed madness. Mad it surely was, more mad because it had been so deceived, as it raced round and round the enclosure, foaming at the mouth, trying in every way it knew to unseat this being who was threatening to conquer it. Speed not availing, it started buck-jumping, head down, back up almost to a point, whirling about, a flying mass of dust, lashed into a fury of rage—and still the man held on, immovable, grimly determined, wrists and legs seeming made of iron, to the rising yells of the throng about the fence, yells that added in no small measure to the commotion and din. "Ride him, cowboy, ride him!"

With something like a prayer on her lips Marion closed her eyes, afraid to watch for a moment. She told herself passionately that she was not a coward; it was only that she was not used to this sort of thing; it terrified, unnerved

her to see----

Yet she must look again—must see it he—

She opened her eyes.

They fell upon Brandon, Brandon standing by Fortescue's horse and whose approach she had not heard, his bold glance travelling over every line of the slim figure above him.

The nature of the look was unmistakable. Marion felt it instinctively, and the smile she had summoned up on seeing him faded. Fortescue's warning came to mind as the rancher drew closer, laying a rough and none-too-clean hand on the neck of her horse, and she shrank back, even though she tried to speak unconcernedly.

"Do—do you think Mr. Fortescue will get hurt?" she stammered hurriedly, her colour fluctuating with her quickened heart-beats. "It looks very dangerous——"

Brandon shrugged his shoulders, still watching her

closely.

"Can't say," he said slowly. "Reckon you look too delicate for these things. You don't look strong enough to hold a horse. Ain't got much strength in them wrists, have you?"

He dared to put out a hand to touch hers, but she drew it away quickly, and he laughed, eyes intent on the alluring

face before him.

"Reckon you ain't as shy as you look!" he said coarsely. "Bet you could tell me a thing or two, eh?"

The vile insinuation brought the blood to Marion's cheek and her courage flowing back as nothing else could have done. She was herself again instantly.

"Will you please take your hand from my horse," she said haughtily. "I think you are trying to be insolent,

Mr. Brandon.'

"Don't be cross, sweet one," he grinned derisively. "All the same, you look mighty fine in a temper; didn't think you had it in you."

"Take your hand away at once!"
"Ask me nicely—and I might."

Marion rarely lost control of herself, but she was suddenly conscious that if she had only a whip in her hand she would have struck him across the mouth with it.

"Unless you take your hand away instantly I shall report you to Mr. Fortescue," she said, with such determination that a shade of uneasiness crossed his face.

"It wouldn't pay you to," he growled menacingly. "Anyway, I ain't afraid of him!"

Nevertheless, he thought fit to move away, and went to the fence just as Fortescue, having at last obtained the mastery over the horse, dashed out of the enclosure in fine style. He was soon out of sight, and the boys, knowing the show was over, began to drift away to their duties. Marion wished some of them would come towards herwondered how long Fortescue would be.

The minutes drifted slowly by, five-ten-fifteenseeming like so many hours. Would he never come and

rid her of this irksome presence?

Then, oh, what relief! In the distance the figure of a horse and rider—nearer—nearer! Brandon saw it, and, with an eloquent glance that seemed to say "Speak if you dare!" began to lounge after the others, and when Fortescue dismounted, throwing the reins to one of the boys, and came hurrying in Marion's direction, he was at a distance that warranted only a passing glance from his boss and roused no suspicion.

"Say," Fortescue cried, as he reached his horse, "you must forgive me keeping you waiting so long. I hope you're not offended-why, how white you look! What's wrong?"

"Nothing!" stammered Marion, and, to his infinite surprise and alarm, two great tears welled up in the dark eyes. "There isn't anything the matter really. It was only—only rather frightening at first. I—I'm not used to all this, and-and-"

"Great shakes!" Fortescue ejaculated wretchedly. "What a blithering fool I am! I might have known you wouldn't like it. And I thought I was giving you a good time!" He mounted Marquis in a very dejected state of mind. "What a callous beast you must think me, Mrs. Holt!"

Callous! Remembering all his actions previously, Marion had to laugh at his self-denunciation, and at the sound of it the man's face brightened visibly.

"Say, you will overlook it this once?" he said eagerly.
"I had no idea you were not enjoying it. You know I

would not have left you had I known."

"Don't be absurd!" Marion replied, smiling, recovering her normal spirits in his comforting proximity. "You ought to forgive me for being so foolish. But, really, it was horrible. I thought you would be killed every minute!"

Sweet hearing that! She had feared for him! Those tears, those white cheeks, were for him, because she had

been afraid for his danger.

Fortescue rode by her side in silence for awhile, digesting that thought many times inwardly, too many times for his peace of mind, until at last Marion chid him for his sudden

quietude.

Then he roused up to make himself agreeable, taking her by many new paths and winding ways, by wood and lane, and the silver creek, until the morning was far spent, finding strange pleasure in showing her his favourite views and resting-places. Homeward—and the feel of that light form in his strong arms as he lifted her down, the delight of that swift, sweet upward look as she thanked him.

"Enjoyed it?" he asked quietly.

Marion nodded.

"It was lovely!" she said softly, and he could not doubt the sincerity of the words. "I must thank you, Mr. Fortescue, for this beautiful creature"—laying a hand on the glossy neck. "I'm afraid it cost you a lot of money; though I've no idea what horses are worth."

"Ignorance is bliss!" he smiled. "Don't you worry,

Mrs. Holt; I can always sell him again if I want to."

But when she was gone into the house he stopped to throw an arm about the neck where her hand had rested a moment.

"Not if I hadn't a penny in the world, old boy!" he whispered, and the brown eyes gave him a glance of perfect understanding.

CHAPTER VII

"ABOUT that riding-skirt—" said Fortescue.

It was breakfast-time on a beautiful sunshiny morning about a week after the arrival of the visitors to the ranch, and the three were seated at the table just finishing their meal.

Marion, busy pouring out a fresh supply of coffee for both men, made no reply for the moment, but Gerald looked up from his plate at the strange remark with enquiring eyes.

"What riding-skirt?"

"Why," said his wife, as she handed him his newly filled cup, "Mr. Fortescue says I must get a proper skirt before I can ride at all well—"

"Or breeches!" Fortescue put in, with a delightful

twinkle.

He was looking radiantly happy these days. Gerald, though already considerably better in health, envied him his high spirits, he who was beginning to feel bored to death in this quiet retreat, for so far he had only been able to take the shortest of walks, and the enforced idleness had made the time hang drearily.

Fortescue's pursuits held no charms for him. He was frankly out of place among the boys and animals—a fact he made no secret of—and his friend, after many patient efforts to rouse his interest in farming and raising stock, decided at last to leave him to amuse himself in his own

way.

Truthfully speaking, the friendship that had existed between them through their correspondence during the past years was not so intimate now they were in each other's society. They had no common aspirations or inclinations. Gerald was enamoured of town life and town dissipations, ambitious, selfish, quick-tempered; Fortescue, easy-going, content with his lot, and of a naturally cheerful disposition, generous to a fault.

Gerald, grasping feverishly at fame, striving fiercely for money and power, never satisfied with what he had attained, was conscious of a feeling of jealousy against his friend who, caring nothing for these things, had obtained them in so

great a measure.

The past week had been a revelation to both Gerald and Marion Holt. Neither had any idea on landing of the extent of Fortescue's possessions. They imagined a farm on the scale of those to be found in England, only decidedly rougher, with perhaps cows, pigs, and a few sheep, a field or two of pasture and others of wheat, a clumsily-built house none too comfortably furnished, and for company a few cowboys more illiterate than the British farm labourer, who, at the first word of opposition, were in the habit of firing off a couple of guns under one's feet and generally raising hell.

They found? A ranch of 1,300 acres, whereon were raised the finest horses and cattle in Alberta, bred under ideal conditions and up-to-date methods. In addition, highly cultivated ground producing heavy crops of oats and barley and field roots, such as turnips, carrots, and sugar beets, fine orchards, a model dairy, and wonderful poultry. A house well built and pleasing to the eye, admirably furnished, and efficiently run by a Chinese who was both

an excellent housekeeper and cook.

The boys, as Fortescue's employees were known, numbering something under twenty, were for the most part poorly educated as regards reading and writing, but specialists in their own business. Any who applied to the ranch for work were submitted to a rigorous cross-examination by the owner as to experience and conduct. Those who won through had no cause for regret, providing they worked hard, lived clean, and obeyed orders. For foreman they had Bob Walton, young in years, but trained to his position by an expert, namely, Fortescue himself. During working hours Bob was the strictest of disciplinarians, getting the last ounce out of his men, and with an eagle eye for faults or slacking. He won their respect by being as strict with himself as he was with them, and their affection as the warmest of pals in leisure moments.

Controlling this thriving concern, worshipped by the boys and respected throughout the province, was John Fortescue. Educated in England, he had joined his father in Canada at the age of twenty to be subjected to the severest course of training man ever had. It stood him in good stead in later years. There was not a branch in stock-raising or farming he did not know, and the results of his labour were the envy of other settlers. His success bred no enemies. His knowledge, his help, was at the disposal of any who cared to ask it. Men who had been farming whilst he was still in pinafores came to him unashamedly to learn his methods. Quite openly he explained his ideas, his system, in terms the simplest brain could understand, showing how he made things that more old-fashioned farmers shied at—namely, up-to-date

machinery and high wages—pay.

"Get the personal touch with your men," he was wont to say if others told of trouble with their boys. It was the secret of his success. It is no exaggeration to say that the majority of his helpers would have died for him. The personal touch! Follow him on his rounds any morning. Perhaps he meets Dick Richards, and stops to give him an order in a sharp, quick manner that is businesslike without being brusque; then hear him say with a change of tone: "About your sister, Dick; Mrs. Oldfield wants a governess for her little boy, and she's willing to take her. It'll get her out of New York, boy!" Or Weston, looking worried to death: "What's the trouble? Father bad? What's that? Operation? Here! I'll finish that; you get away at once; and, Weston, the best surgeon you can get—savvy?"

See him seated at his desk. A knock at the door; enter

Tex Walters, looking very sheepish.

"Sorry, boss, but we'll have to part."

"How's that? Better job? More money?"

Nothing like that. Going to get married and take a small holding of his own.

"Which?"

Walters mentions one near by that is up for sale.

"What about the one at Bashaw? You'd do better there."

"No good, boss. Too risky for a start; haven't the cash at the back of me."

"That's so! But I'm at the back of you. Fifteen

years' service; I ought to know you well enough to stand security! Fix it up, Tex; we'll go into it this evening."

John Fortescue's way! It paid!

Something of this struck Gerald Holt very forcibly as he looked across at his friend this morning, but he covered the rankling thoughts with a forced laugh as he said:

"I can't imagine Marion in breeches!"

Marion, slightly flushed, but amused at the suggestion, gave a quick exclamation.

"Oh, no! It will have to be a skirt, Mr. Fortescue."

"Right you are!" Fortescue laughed. "If you're both agreeable I'll run you down to town when you're ready. Reckon you'd best see Dolly Costello; she'll put you wise about your outfit."

Gerald, lighting an after-breakfast cigarette, looked

mildly interested on hearing a woman's name.

"Who in the world is Dolly Costello?" he enquired

languidly. "Sounds like a revue dancer!"

"Nothing so common! Dolly's a celebrity in these parts. Daughter of Tom Costello, saloon-keeper down town, and the prettiest child in the foothill district."

"Child!" echoed Gerald, curling a scornful lip. He was not interested in children, or a girl as young as

Fortescue's expression led him to believe.

Marion, on the other hand, was eager for information on any subject.

"How old is she, Mr. Fortescue?" she asked, leaning

her arms on the table.

"Oh"-Fortescue made some mental calculations-"I reckon eighteen or nineteen-not quite nineteen. She was a little tot of about five when I came out, a dear mite, and I've always thought of her as just a pretty child. I beg the young lady's pardon," he added, with another broad smile, "I forget the long train of admirers! I think you'll like her, Mrs. Holt; and if you feel disposed to make a friend of her I'd be real glad."

"Is your interest in the fair damsel of the fatherly order. or do you count yourself as one of the train?" put in

Gerald pointedly.

Fortescue stopped abruptly, his grey eyes unusually

surprised and wondering as they rested on Gerald's face.

For a moment he made no reply, then:

"I guess my interest is only that which any man who tries to live clean must feel when he sees a young girl in a place that's rife with every temptation," he said quietly, but with an aloof dignity which made Marion aware that the insinuation, however light, had been somewhat resented. "At least, any man in these parts would take that interest.

"I reckon we have different notions about women out here, Gerald. Miss Dolly could ride up to this ranch to-morrow, spend a couple of hours among the boys and the horses, and go back free from scandal; and I'm prouder of that fact than of anything else in the world. I'm not boasting—I've no call to, for there's many houses where the same might be said; and it's men like these who keep the besotted, dissipated brutes who haunt the saloon in order. There isn't a crook in this country dare lay a finger on Tom Costello's girl. He knows, if he does, that my gun, and the gun of every man in the district, is ready to make a hole in his dirty carcass-"

He broke off, met Marion's gaze, eyes warm and glow-

ing with unconcealed admiration, and went slowly red.

'Say, was I preaching? Well, here endeth the first lesson!"-laughing to cover his sudden emotion, for the subject of Dolly Costello had strangely moved him. "Now, if you'll get your coat on, Mrs. Holt, I'll send for the buggy. That's done it!" he added, as he caught his friend's disgusted "Reckon you'll want to stay at home now!"

But for once he was mistaken. After a moment's hesitation Gerald announced his intention of accompanying them, and

he departed with Marion to get their outdoor things.

It was Bob Walton who brought the buggy round, and when Fortescue strolled down to the gate a few minutes later he found him still standing there petting the horses, the same pair of chestnuts Marion had so much admired, looking a perfect picture with their glossy coats shining in the sun.

Bob turned swiftly as his boss came up to him.

"Say," he exclaimed sharply, "ain't there some mistake? Richards says you want the buggy to go down town——"
"That's correct!"

"But you're sure forgettin' 'bout ole Thomson; he's

comin' over this morning 'bout them steers!"

"No, I haven't forgotten," returned Fortescue, unperturbed, standing still to light his pipe. "You'll have to see him, Bob. I'm taking Mrs. Holt down about her riding-outfit. You know what to do."

Bob grunted. "He'll look to see you," was his com-

ment in a dry sort of tone.

"Well, he'll have to look again," Fortescue retorted,

with a flash of unusual irritation.

Bob made no answer to that. He stood stroking the horses, and looking as if he was digesting something none too pleasant in his mind.

"You left that other deal to me-" he said, after a

pause. "Y' know, last week, an' I made a mess of it."

Fortescue, dreamily hanging over the gate, looked up with a start and a slight frown.

"What's the matter with you, Bob? Job too much for you? If it is, say so!—and I'll get help."

"Tain't that!" cried Bob, reddening. "It's—it's so uncommon funny to see you slack, that's all; an' you stand to lose money when other folks interfere."

Fortescue broke into a laugh, his momentary irritation

dispelled in an instant.

"Hang the money!" he said vigorously. "Reckon I can afford a holiday; and I think I deserve one. You carry on, and don't make yourself a nuisance if you can help it, Bob!"

Bob raised his head, giving his boss a long, steady look, but the latter, hearing the house door open, was paying

him no attention.

Marion was coming down the garden-path followed by

Gerald, and Fortescue had no eyes for anything else.

She had donned a costume of deep almond green, with wide, up-turned collar and cuffs of rich, thick brown fur, and a coquettish little hat. With her shining eyes, delicately tinted cheeks, and smiling lips, she seemed the personification of spring itself. Bob, silently waiting, heard the quick, indrawn breath of the man beside him, and his eyes grew troubled. Indeed, he looked so strangely serious that Marion commented on it as Fortescue helped her into her place.

"Bob, is anything the matter this morning? You look quite miserable!"

Bob gave her a glance, the same kind of glance he had

given his boss, quiet but searching.

"I'm all right," he said slowly, without the usual pleased smile that a remark from Marion always called up. "Goin" down town, I hear."

"Yes," returned Marion, smiling, but a little puzzled, nevertheless, at his manner. "Don't you wish you were

coming?"

Fortescue had sprung up and was preparing to start, first tucking the fur rug closely about the woman beside him.

Something in his attitude seemed to annoy his foreman.

He went suddenly red.

"No," he snapped, as he turned away.

work ter do. I ain't like some folks-

"Why," Marion cried a trifle breathlessly, as the horse trotted down the road, "Bob seemed quite cross about something."

Fortescue laughed, apparently unconcerned over his

foreman's outburst.

"Oh, he's an impetuous young wretch—and a stickler for work," he said easily. "He gave me a lecture on slacking just now, but I told him I meant to take a holiday. Haven't had one for years!"

Gerald, carelessly listening, put in a word from the

back seat.

"If a fellow spoke to me like that I should tell him to clear out," he said, with a grand "I'll-not-be-dictated-to" air that inwardly tickled his friend. He raised surprised eyebrows.

"Would you?" he said reflectively, and then, with a slow smile, "I reckon we take things different out here, Gerald. We don't bar a man speaking his mind if we do buy his labour. He can say what he likes-of course within limits. As to Bob-" His face went suddenly grave. "It would take an almighty lot of good talking to separate us. We're more than foreman and boss—we're pals, almost brothers, and have been so from the day he came."

CHAPTER VIII

THE town of Lone Star Creek proved, on arrival, to be neither large nor attractive. True, on this first visit, the Holts only saw the wide main street, but that wore an untidy, straggling look, with its roughly built stores and houses, many in the far stages of dilapidation, and gave a very good idea of what less important streets must be like.

The only place of any size was Tom Costello's saloon, with a newly erected dance-hall attached. There was certainly a church, a small, wooden building with a corrugated-iron roof, looking woefully neglected, and a school something after the same pattern. These, the sheriff's office, and the jail, were the only buildings of note.

As they drove in Marion noticed the mixed class of people in the street. There were rough miners, lumbermen, cowboys, and, mingling with these, men more smart and prosperous in appearance—prospectors, tourists, company promoters. In addition, a generous sprinkling of Japs and Chinese. A medley crowd of more than doubtful reputation.

The women, too, were either ultra smart and heavily painted or slatternly and dirty, causing Marion's lip to

curl a little in faint disgust.

The appearance of John Fortescue's buggy with its strange occupants seemed to give rise to much curiosity and comment. Marion was soon hotly aware of pointed glances and by no means subdued remarks as they pulled up before Costello's saloon.

Fortescue, with many a nod and word of greeting to his numerous acquaintances, sprang down as they halted, giving the reins to Marion.

"If you'll just wait a second," he said quickly, "I'll

bring Miss Dolly out to you."

"Wouldn't it be better if we came in?" asked Marion, conscious of sundry small groups of women interestedly

studying her clothes in a way that made her suddenly anxious to get under cover.

Fortescue shook his head.

"The saloon's a rough house, Mrs. Holt, better wait here. If Miss Dolly isn't busy we'll drive her back to lunch, then you can discuss details."

With a smile he turned and strode across the rough pavement, disappearing through the swing doors that led

into the saloon.

He was gone some minutes, and Marion, altering her position, made an effort to engage Gerald in conversation in order to avoid meeting the gaze of the strange throng passing by.

"How do you like our home town, Gerald?" she asked,

laughing a little.

Gerald, surveying the street through half-closed eyes,

his usual habit, actually smiled in response.

"Better than the ranch," he said emphatically. "It's a jolly sight more cheerful, anyway. As soon as I can use my legs to any purpose I shall come down occasionally."

Marion's face grew suddenly grave. She knew that

tone of old—restless, dissatisfied.

"I don't think it's at all nice," she began, but was instantly checked by him answering in that old irritable, peevish way.

"You wouldn't, of course! I wonder when you will

find something to suit you."

"The ranch suits me perfectly," she returned quietly.
"Well, it doesn't suit me!" her husband retorted

"Well, it doesn't suit me!" her husband retorted sullenly. "I'm not going to be quite buried alive. I——"

"Be quiet!" Marion interrupted hurriedly. "Here

comes Mr. Fortescue with Miss Costello."

Fortescue had at that moment emerged from the saloon and was crossing the pavement towards them. By his side walked one of the prettiest girls Marion had ever seen; and in her career she had seen more than a few.

Not more than eighteen or nineteen, Dolly Costello was *petite* and plump with a perfect pink and white complexion, large, long-lashed blue eyes, innocent as those of a child,

and a head covered with a mass of golden curls pinned up very carelessly, but seeming all the more charming for

their disarray.

That she was shy in the presence of these strangers was obvious from the rich blush mounting to her cheek, the fleeting glance, lowered again almost immediately. Fortescue brought her to the side of the buggy.

"Mrs. Holt-Gerald-meet Miss Dolly Costello!

Dolly-Mrs. Holt and her husband from England."

Dolly gave each a hand, murmuring something in a soft but otherwise uncultivated little voice in reply to Marion's

kindly words of greeting.

Gerald she hardly looked at; but the same could not be said of that gentleman! Behind Marion's back he was making a close study of the upturned face, studying it as only the man who habitually studies women can do.

Marion saw nothing. She was engaged in skilfully drawing the girl into conversation by asking her advice about the riding-skirt, and Dolly, reassured and put at ease by the friendly attitude, ventured to give her opinion and make one or two timid suggestions.

"Say," put in Fortescue comically, after waiting in the background for some minutes, "this looks like being a long job, eh, Gerald? Reckon you'd better come back with

us to lunch, Miss Dolly—unless you're too busy."
"Dol" said Marion, smiling, as Dolly cast a doubtful glance in her direction before replying. "We should be glad to have you."

"Thank you very much," said the girl, with a pleased look. "I must just tell Dad; I won't keep you."

She turned to run back, throwing a final word over her shoulder.

"I'll ride Peter, then you can see my skirt, Mrs. Holt.

I'll catch you up!"

She was gone; and Fortescue stepped up into his place,

gathering the reins from Marion's hands.

"We'll walk the horses along slowly," he said. "There's no need to hang about here. Miss Dolly will soon overtake us on her horse—he's some goer!"

"Can she ride?" asked Gerald, over their shoulders.

He seemed to have recovered from his fit of temper, and

looked quite amiable and smiling.

"Ride!" his friend echoed. "I reckon so! Anything on four legs. She has ridden from a child, and knows how to handle a horse. A good judge of them too. Ask her what she thinks of yours, Mrs. Holt. Oh, by the way, have you found a name for him yet?"

"No." Marion laughed. "I've been trying to think-What do you suggest? Gerald, what shall I call my horse?" Always she made the effort to draw him into their discussions. Gerald had no ideas on such a mundane subject. He was bored at the mere mention of it.

"Call him what you like," he said, yawning lazily. "A horse by any other name would-er-answer the

same purpose!"

Fortescue laughed, then looked thoughtfully at his own pair, now stepping so sedately.

"It's your fancy," he said.
"I haven't any," returned Marion, rather helplessly. "I thought of White Stockings---"

"Overdone. Every horse with white ankles gets called

that. Think again !"

"No good," she said, after a moment. "This isn't one of my bright days. I'm afraid I couldn't think of anything so original as you did," her eyes, like his, resting on the chestnuts.

"Conceit and Deceit?" Fortescue laughed. "Not so bad, eh? They live up to it. Watch Conceit toss his head—he's as proud as a peacock—and the other is the trickiest beggar I've met. They're a well-matched pair. Well?"

At the dubious shake of the head he said, with twinkling

"How about Silver Star? Y' know, that patch on his forehead isn't unlike one."

She flashed a look of delight at him.

"Why, that sounds just right. Silver Star of Lone Star Creek. What could be better? Gerald, my horse is to be christened Silver Star. How do you like it?"

"Not bad," approved Gerald. "I hope you don't

intend to break a bottle of champagne over his head at the ceremony."

"I should think not!" Marion exclaimed, with such

innocent indignation that Fortescue roared.

They had not long to wait for Miss Dolly. There came the sudden clatter of flying hoofs, a cloud of dust, and a big brown horse on which was mounted a trim little figure in fawn-coloured riding-outfit flashed by the buggy, turned at some distance up the road, and dashed back, pulling up by Marion's side in fine style.

"How d'you like me?" the girl cried, lifting a flushed,

excited face.

"Very much," returned Marion sincerely, her smiling face openly expressing frank admiration of the girl's

horsemanship and charming appearance.

Fortescue, taking keen but silent interest, reflected inwardly that all women were not born with a streak of jealous envy, and was surprised to find how glad the

knowledge of it made him feel.

The ride home was singularly pleasant. No one hurried. The bright sun and brisk air were an inducement to lingering. Even Gerald appeared content to lie back lazily against the cushions and enjoy the many beautiful sights about them. Marion thought him half asleep, but probably Miss Dolly knew better. Not all the rosiness in her cheeks was due to the exertion of controlling the vigorous Peter. She had several times in that homeward journey surprised the strange gentleman's eyes resting on her, and something in their expression may have accounted for the rich glow of colour, the sudden lowering of the long fringed lashes.

They lunched together, a happy enough little party, in the large, comfortable sitting-room, with Ah Wing hovering about in close attendance and beaming blandly on the visitor—for Miss Dolly was a general favourite with one and all at the ranch—and Fortescue, pleased at the success of his suggestion, playing the hospitable host to perfection.

Had Marion been harbouring a doubt as to his interest in Dolly Costello his attitude towards the girl during that meal must have convinced and reassured her. As it was, she was conscious of a stir of emotion, of wonder and infinite tenderness, as she watched him with his frank air of comradeship, his sweet, friendly glance that yet held something very kind, very protective towards this motherless child. He might have been her brother, a brother much older in years and experience; and the girl herself seemed

to dimly realise it.

Mingled with her careless, happy speech and laughter was a deference and obedience very touching to witness. She had known this man from a child, he had been old to her always—not so much in years as in wisdom—and there had grown up in her heart a deep reverence for him that could never be effaced. If anyone had said to Dolly, reared as she was in rough surroundings, amid ignorance and much vice: "Dolly, what do you suppose God is like?" she would have answered in utter sincerity: "Why, I reckon He's just like Mr. Fortescue—there sure couldn't be anyone better or straighter than him!"

It was after lunch, and Marion had at last departed with the new acquaintance into her own room to delve into the mysteries of dress, leaving the men alone, that Fortescue

turned to his friend with smiling face.

"Now confess, Gerald," he said gaily, "that, despite all your assertions to the contrary, Lone Star Creek can boast something in the way of beauty, after all!"

Gerald, his face half hidden behind a cloud of cigarette

smoke, looked up with rather a curious expression.

"Oh, I'm quite willing to admit I was mistaken. Your Miss Costello is certainly deucedly pretty."

"She sure is! Pretty is just the word—a pretty

child---

Gerald's lips twitched a little as he blew out another cloud of smoke, watching it curl up towards the ceiling in seeming carelessness.

"Not such a child as you imagine, perhaps," he said languidly. "Those eyes and lips were made for flirtation! I wonder how many hearts they've played havoc with."

Fortescue looked grave a moment, and then laughed.

"Oh, all the town's been in love with her ever since she could toddle, but I never heard of anything serious. Maybe in a year or two one of them will go in and winprobably Bob Walton. But I think if you asked her she would tell you, as she once told me, that they are such rough boobs! Miss Dolly has great notions, I assure you."

Gerald laughed.

"Let's hope she'll realise them. Funny how a little uneducated thing like that gets such high ideas. No doubt she has had her share of flattery even out here. I suppose most men would easily fall victim to her charms."

Fortescue filled his pipe with a thoughtful air before

answering.

"No doubt," he said presently. "But she is hardly the type to inspire a great passion. When I see her against women like Mrs. Holt I realise what a little mere prettiness counts for—"

Gerald sat up, gazing across the room at his friend in

unconcealable astonishment.

"Against Marion?" he ejaculated incredulously. "You mean—"

It was Fortescue's turn to show surprise.

"You surely consider your wife immeasurably Miss Dolly's superior in every way, Gerald! Why "—he laughed a little, as if there could be no doubt about it—" it's like comparing a dainty little daisy to a fragrant rose!"

Gerald echoed the laugh, but there was a subtle difference

in the quality of it.

"How poetical!" he said.

Something in the tone, the faintest suspicion of a sneer, brought the quick blood to Fortescue's cheek, but he resolutely ignored it, taking the words in their natural

meaning.

"Why not?" he retorted, smiling. "We're not quite barbarians out here, Gerald. We can still appreciate beauty, and wax eloquent over it. Honestly, I've never seen a more beautiful woman than your wife."

"Perhaps you haven't seen many!"

Again that faint note jarring on the other man's sensitive ear.

"I haven't lived to be thirty-three without meeting a good many," he said quietly, but with a significant touch which unfortunately was quite lost on his friend.

"Well, I've never considered Marion a beauty," the latter retorted carelessly, as Fortescue paused. "As for being like a rose, you're hopelessly wrong there!" He laughed ironically. "Have you ever seen one of those tall, slender white lilies growing that look so horribly cold and standoffish—icy? Well, that's Marion! There's nothing of the warm, glowing rose about my wife, I can tell you!"

"I always thought a lily singularly lovely," said Fortescue, very low, after a moment. "Pure, stately, perfect—and the perfume of it can fill the whole house with

sweetness---'

Gerald twisted impatiently in his chair.

"Oh, bosh!" he said rudely. "There's no woman on earth like that. You always did have a lot of high-flown

ideas about them, I remember."

High-flown ideas! Fortescue winced as he listened, his thoughts rushing back over the years, remembering another who had sat in the very chair Gerald now occupied, one who had held such widely different views—his father, chivalrous, courtly, tender.

"And you?" he asked, regarding his friend with strange

earnestness.

"I never did," returned Gerald candidly. "I've always taken them for what they're worth—which isn't much!"

"I'm surprised to hear you speak that way." Fortescue got up abruptly and walked to the window. "One would think you had no respect, no reverence for women at all by your remarks. I—I can't bring myself to believe that."

"Oh, reverence be hanged! That sort of thing is out of date. All very well, perhaps, for boys and greybeards, but not for men like ourselves. You've become a trifle old-fashioned, Fortescue, living out here in the wilds."

"Really?" Fortescue's tone was dry. "I admit my views are somewhat different from yours, Gerald. Maybe living in the wilds, as you say, accounts for it. When we see frail, delicate women battling with the problems of the West, facing things many men would shrink from, we get rather exalted ideas—""

"Oh, women are all right if you know how to handle

them. They can be the very devil, though, when they like," reflectively, with the air of one who knows all there

is to know on his subject.

"Yet you married one!" Fortescue exclaimed, without looking round. "You, who always hated home-life, children, any sort of tie—and you've been married eight years, while I'm still a bachelor. You must have fallen pretty deeply in love with the 'cold, standoffish lily,' for all your talk, to capitulate so rapidly."

"You forget Marion has other qualities. The beauty I recognised was in her voice. I needed her as a partner, a partner who, reading my moods, could interpret them

in song—an intimate relationship—"

"Surely---"

"I need not have married her?" queried Gerald. "No, but—er—unfortunately I couldn't get her any other way!"

He laughed a little as he said it, with a mixture of audacity and ruefulness, but there was no answering smile on the stern, set face of Fortescue. He stood perfectly still by the window, his eyes, hard as steel and as unseeing, fixed on the distant horizon.

"Mr. Fortescue!"

It was Marion's voice behind him, rousing him. He swung round to face her as again she said:

"Mr. Fortescue!"

She had come in quietly, and had Dolly beside her, but, if her entrance was quiet, her manner was excited, joyous.

"Oh," she said, as he turned, "I just wanted to ask you—please may we all go to the dance in a fortnight's time down town? It is the opening night of the new hall, Dolly says, and everyone will be there. I know you disapprove of the town, but can we go this once—please? I should love to——"

Fortescue's eyes rested a long moment on the upraised face. In its look of dancing happiness at the prospect of a few hours' pleasure he read only too well how barren her life had been of such delights, and it smote him to the heart.

Gerald was putting some question to Dolly in the background, and the reply from his friend in that low, vibrating tone, the intent glance, so full of overwhelming pity and tenderness, was unnoticed by either.

"Anything-anything in the world, if it makes you

happy! I—I——'

He broke off abruptly, seemed about to add something more, but conquered the impulse, and, turning quickly, with a sharp gesture, eloquent of pain and helplessness, strode out through the window, leaving her to stare after his retreating figure in sudden surprise and bewilderment.

"Marion, are you dreaming?" her husband ejaculated, with no little impatience. "I've spoken to you twice, and you stand there as if in a trance. Miss Costello would like to see some of our photographs. Where did you put them?"

Marion looked up with a start, a wave of hot colour

flooding her cheeks.

"I'm sorry, Gerald—I——" Her stammering answer, the sudden rush of colour in her cheeks, betrayed something of the inward agitation. "I was thinking. I'll get you the case."

CHAPTER IX

FORTESCUE'S strange expression was not easily forgotten by Marion Holt. It haunted her persistently during the days that followed, haunted her the more because he seemed to lose something of his hearty cheerfulness, his care-free manner, though he was, as ever, unfailingly kind and considerate both to Gerald and herself, devoting much of his time to their convenience and pleasure.

Still, she could not fail to see that he had become more serious, more gravely thoughtful, and, with a woman's quick intuition, guessed the source of it lay with her

husband.

That Fortescue would soon read his friend pretty clearly she had realised from the first, and often in the seclusion of her own room her face would flush with shame as she

wondered what his opinion must be.

Miss Dolly, quickly making friends with the visitors, had the run of the ranch at Fortescue's invitation, the latter thinking it wise for Marion to have a little companionship with one of her own sex. The girl took full advantage of her opportunities, and several times during the next fortnight Marion found her in the garden chatting merrily to Gerald when she returned from her morning ride.

The morning ride had by now become quite an institution, and the slight figure on the chestnut horse, invariably accompanied by the unmistakable figure of the boss, was

already a familiar sight in the district.

Knowing her husband so well, Marion was at first inclined to feel some anxiety on Dolly's account, and found her pleasure in the girl's society a little spoilt by a sense of vague uneasiness. She watched their intercourse, every look and word, as closely as she could without rousing suspicion—not in her husband's breast; that she cared little for—but in Fortescue's. Even now she sought to hide the worst from him, more so when she remembered how deeply he felt about this unprotected child.

But after a while her fears were allayed. The girl's immature ways, her lack of culture and education, and indifferent style of dress, coupled with Gerald's apparently careless demeanour reassured her. With the recent memory of Pamela Cartwright still in mind, Marion told herself that Miss Dolly Costello was not likely to capture Gerald

Holt's fancy.

Whereas Gerald betrayed no interest in ranch life, Marion won all hearts by entering into every pursuit with unfeigned delight and ready adaptability. Before breakfast she would spend an hour among the poultry, with Tex Regan, who had charge of that branch, and, though Tex inwardly wondered what in the world a lady like Mrs. Holt wanted with such knowledge, he could not resist the novelty and charm of her presence, and set himself to teach her the art of chicken-rearing.

After breakfast came the morning ride. Later, if time

permitted, an hour in the garden before lunch.

The boys secretly worshipped, and enticed her down to the cabins on any pretext in order to admire at close quarters. Their childlike simplicity was a source of perpetual joy to Marion, and she never wearied of a few moments in their company, telling them little tales of the life she had left behind, and others that had raised a laugh on many a London stage. They had a sense of humour, these boys, she was quick to discover, and it soon formed a friendly link between them and herself. Friendly, never familiar! They never forgot that she was the guest of the boss—with one exception, the rancher Brandon. But of him more later.

To get her down to the huts necessitated a variety of excuses, all of which she saw through, despite the apparently

blind eye she turned on them.

It chanced that one afternoon while she was in their midst—this time to settle a slight argument relative to a story she had told them the day before illustrating the generosity of the long-suffering Scot—Tommy Brennan had the misfortune to catch his arm on some rough wire fencing up at the stables and walked in with the injured member extended, demanding general sympathy.

He got it—but not as he quite expected. As soon as he appeared Marion took possession of him entirely, deposited his willing self on a chair, sent Harry Weston flying for warm water and lint, and set to bathing and dressing the wound with tenderly skilful fingers. If she was aware of Tommy's furtive winks over her bent head, and responding grins from the rest of the company, she made no sign. For the first time in her life she was having a game, a real game of fun and make-believe, aided and abetted by these great, over-grown children.

It was astonishing, after this small incident, how many times someone was sent flying up to the house with all

manner of requests, such as:

"Please would Mrs. Holt come along quick—Big Bill's broke his leg"; or "Harry Weston's tore his hand on a nail"; or "One of the boys is took sick and wants you!"

Horrible details were added if she seemed inclined to

waver, suspecting the injuries to be a myth.

"Bill says he thinks it's all up, missie." "Dick's real bad—sinking fast—you'd best hurry if you wanta speak

to him afore he goes!"

More astonishing were the rapid recoveries. A boy lying groaning dismally with pain as she entered the hut would revive at the mere touch of her hand on his forehead—but only while she kept it there!

"Oh, missie, I feel real bad! Say, if you was ter hold my

hand a bit---'

"Is that better?" she would say, taking the rough paw in her own hand, a demure smile lurking about her lips.

"Sure, it feels good ter me—oh! oh! the pain!"—as

she withdrew it again, with the laughing cry of:

"You fraud! I don't believe there's a pain at all!"

"Honest to God, missie! I bin keeping 'em awake all night. Ain't I, boys?" And then, slily: "Say, if you was ter sit here a bit and talk——"

Which meant that in less than five minutes she was enthroned on a bench with six or eight of them round about, laughing, joking, and entertaining in a way that would have caused Gerald to open his eyes wide in surprise.

Talking was not the only thing they got out of her.

Fortescue soon had to take her to task for pampering them with hot cakes, custard tarts, and various other dainties made in Ah Wing's until now unassailable strong-

hold, the kitchen.

The only one who kept aloof was Bob Walton, but, knowing he had the bulk of the management on his shoulders at this time, Marion thought nothing of his long absences, and his anxiety to get away when they did meet she put down to the fact that he was "such a stickler for work," as Fortescue had remarked. If not exactly gushing, he was at least always quietly pleasant and civil, so that it never occurred to Marion he might be deliberately avoiding her company.

The morning of the day on which the dance was to be held at Costello's saloon, dawned after a fortnight of con-

genial tasks and happy hours.

Fortescue having arranged to take Marion for a longer ride than usual, the horses were brought round to the gate directly after breakfast, and as soon as the latter was

ready they prepared to set out.

Marion looked unusually charming in a dark fawn riding-skirt similar to Dolly's, with a close-fitting coat to match, relieved by a white silk blouse, on her head a wide-brimmed felt hat; and Fortescue seemed to find the picture very alluring as he came down the garden-path with Gerald. He broke off from the casual remark he was passing to his friend and hastened forward.

"All ready, Mrs. Holt? We're going to have a lovely morning—it will be quite hot presently. By the way,

here's something towards your outfit."

He held it out—a dainty riding-whip of light make, very pretty. Marion took it with a little glow of pleasure.

"Oh, isn't it sweet! Look, Gerald." She held it out to her husband for his inspection. "Thank you very much, Mr. Fortescue."

much, Mr. Fortescue.

He was smiling, finding rare pleasure in giving her even a small gift such as this. He had dared to give it because it was so small, of such little value. It was daily growing a stronger temptation to lavish all the choice things his wealth enabled him to buy upon her.

"It's only for ornament, mind!" he said warningly, as they turned the horses and trotted off down the road

after waving a gay good-bye to Gerald.

It was, as Fortescue had said, a lovely morning. Marion, already showing promise of good horsemanship, rode happily by Fortescue's side chatting to him in her frank, quiet way of the dance, of Dolly, and the boys, any little thing she thought might interest him, with the natural desire of her friendly nature to spend the hours pleasantly.

That they were pleasant was apparent from her companion's expression. He looked thoroughly content to sit his horse and listen to her voice, sometimes putting in a remark or a question, but for the most part saying little.

They reached their destination, a beauty spot in the hills about eight miles from the ranch, known as "The Singing Pool," where, cascading down the rocks, they found a miniature waterfall that fell over the stone into a basin-like hollow with a curious hissing sound. Here they watered the horses, and then, turning to the right, went on a little distance to an outlying farmhouse, pausing there to obtain a glass of milk for Marion and another of home-brewed cyder for Fortescue.

Thoroughly refreshed, they set their horses' heads for home; and it was soon afterwards that the perfect harmony of the morning was rudely broken and Fortescue had the fright of his life. He had previously commented on the fact that Silver Star seemed restive and fidgety-an unusual thing, for Marion's mount was docile as a rule-and now, as they rode along, he again drew her attention to it.

"Silver Star looks in a nasty mood. I wonder what's wrong with him. Out of sorts, maybe. Hold him firmly, Mrs. Holt."

"Poor boy!" said Marion. "I expect he's tired of just trotting along—as I am." And her eyes went wistfully to the tempting stretch of open country before them. "Don't you think I might let him run, Mr. Fortescue?"

"No good," returned her instructor promptly. "Your seat isn't safe enough yet by any means. I'd never forgive

myself if you got thrown.'

Marion pulled a little face expressive of disappointment.

"Silver Star wouldn't throw me, would you, old boy?"—leaning forward to pat the chestnut's neck, at which he threw up his head with a quick, nervous movement Fortescue was swift to notice.

"Don't you figure on that," he told her. "He's badtempered and restless, and if you upset him he'd throw you sure enough, if you couldn't hang on. Please don't play with the idea. I'm the best judge."

For some unknown reason the demon of perversity took

possession of Marion.

"I'm sure it would be quite safe," she persisted.

The smile left her companion's face as he realised that

she was more serious than he had thought.

"I'm sure it wouldn't be," he said, with a touch of sternness. "Please be guided by me. That horse may have taken a fancy to you, but the acquaintance is too short yet. You're a stranger as soon as you touch him with that whip—a stranger with a sting, to be shaken off as soon as possible. Don't take the risk—and please remember what I should feel like if I saw him do a bolt!"

If he hadn't added that last all would have been well, but, sure of her control over the animal, and not realising, as Fortescue did, his highly strung condition, Marion could not resist the impulse to give this confident, ironnerved man a harmless scare, and, acting on the spur of the moment, she gave her horse a smart cut across the

flank with the whip.

She was hardly prepared for the outcome of her action. Silver Star reared on his hind legs, a figure of startled wrath, mouth curled back in a snarl, eyes distended—and then, before Fortescue, quick as he was, could catch the reins in his grip, he was off like the wind, racing madly, with Marion, thoroughly alarmed now, clinging on as best she could. A sharp gallop with a horse well under control is one thing, but a wild rush on an animal that you cannot cope with, violently shaken, every step loosening your frantic hold, with the blood hammering in your head, and your breath coming in gasps that threaten to choke you, is a very different situation.

What Fortescue felt is indescribable. The shock seemed

to dull his senses for the moment, leaving him staring after the flying figure, rigid, motionless. But, almost instantly, came the awful thought of her danger, and, digging his heels into his horse, he was after her at top speed, praying that he would reach her before she was tossed in the air like a piece of thistledown.

Horrible thoughts surged through his brain as he rode—visions of that small head battered by a rough boulder, the slight figure broken from a heavy fall, came before his eyes—and, above all, the dreadful fear of what he might

have to carry back to Gerald.

Gaining on her at every stride—faster! faster!—he could see the swaying form, the white hands losing their clutch of Silver Star's mane. On! On! Closer! Closer!

A swift downward swoop from the saddle as he drew alongside, and his strong arm snatching her upward to his breast, held fast against him while he checked with some difficulty the mad career of his own faithful friend, who had

responded so gallantly to his need.

She had fainted he knew before he dismounted and looked into her face, white now as the lilies her husband had likened her to. It was the work of a moment to place her on the grass and force a little of the brandy from the flask he always carried between the pale lips, his arm still supporting the drooping head.

The raw spirit had immediate effect, for the collapse was only slight. A shudder ran through her, a tinge of faint colour crept into her cheeks, and eyes very startled and bewildered met the grey ones bending over her.

"Oh," she gasped, "what happened?—oh, I remember." She shivered with the returning horror. "That dreadful

ride!"

Fortescue made no answer. As she moved he released her quickly and rose to his feet, busying himself in replacing the stopper of his flask in readiness to put it away. Looking up, Marion could not fail to see how his fingers shook as they performed the operation, the deadly pallor of the stern, set face; and the light words with which she had meant to relieve the situation died on her lips, leaving her ashamed and full of contrition.

"Mr. Fortescue!" she said almost timidly.

He glanced at her, a glance that baffled her to read. She could not tell if he was seriously angry or not—a strange, veiled glance, easily covering the man's inner feeling.

Like a child accused of wrong-doing, she tried to make apology, the words coming none too smoothly in her

nervousness at his curious manner.

"I'm so sorry if I alarmed you unnecessarily, Mr. Fortescue. I never thought—it was just a sudden impulse——"

"That's not true," he put in quietly. "You did think

-you thought to give me a scare!"

Unable to deny it, Marion flushed scarlet.

"Oh, yes—I suppose—that is—I—"

He turned away abruptly to where his horse was standing as if to cut short her futile excuses. The action hurt more than anything he could have said, and her eyes, as she watched him, filled with hot, scalding tears. How was she to know he would be so annoyed over a moment's carelessness, she asked herself miserably, as she stood up, feeling very shaky about the knees.

He brought the horse to her side, holding the bridle in

his hand and looking down at her.

"If you're feeling better," he said, seemingly unmoved by her agitation, "we'll be getting back. You can ride Marquis—"

"But my horse---"

"I'll send Bob after him. A few hours' ramble will give

him time to cool his heels a bit."

"Perhaps we'd better take him along with us," said Marion doubtfully. "Mr. Brandon is looking after him, and I don't think he likes much trouble——"

"Brandon! I thought you gave the job to Bob. Didn't

he suit?"

"Oh, yes; but I suppose he was too busy--"

"That accounts for the temper," said Fortescue thoughtfully, frowning a little. "I don't like Brandon's handling of animals. I'll speak to Bob about it. Now, if you're ready——"

He held out his hand to help her, but she drew back.

"You'll have to walk!"

"Sure," he returned drily, but with a slight twitch at the corners of his mouth that told he was recovering his

normal manner.

He watched her as she hesitated a moment, finally resigning herself to the inevitable with such meek obedience that again the firm lips quivered in a desire for laughter, quickly dispelled as he felt the trembling of the slim form while lifting her into the saddle. If he was anxious he managed to conceal it pretty successfully. As he put the reins into her hands their fingers touched, and once more she saw that look—unfathomable, veiled—and wondered.

"You seem determined to heap coals of fire on my poor

head," she exclaimed, half amused, half resentful.

" How so?"

"Making me ride while you walk."

"I hope it will be a lesson to you not to disregard superior judgment. Your waywardness has spoilt a delightful morning, upset everyone——"

"Oh, you are as bad as a woman, with your 'I told you so!" she cried audaciously. "After all, if I had been

thrown no one else would be hurt but me---"

"That's childish talk!" he said shortly, but in a way that effectively silenced her, and for the rest of the half an hour's journey homeward she saw nothing but the brim of his wide hat and the broad shoulders as he walked by the horse's head.

Gerald, impatiently waiting for his lunch, already an hour late owing to the unaccountable absence of the riders, raised his eyebrows in faint surprise as they came up to where he hung lazily over the garden gate, scanning Marion's ruffled appearance with hostile eyes.

"Hello!" he ejaculated. "What's the great idea? And what a deuce of a time you've been," he added,

remembering his grievance.

"Sorry, old man," Fortescue answered, smiling. Then becoming grave again immediately. "Your wife's horse ran away with her. I nearly had to bring her home in pieces! Fortunately there's no damage done, except slight shock, but I think she ought to rest this afternoon."

Gerald glanced at his wife. True, there was a furrow in his brow, but it was not carved there through anxiety

on her account, as his words soon proved.

"Just what I expected would happen," he ejaculated with great irritation. "Tearing about the country on that wild beast. You'll break your neck before you've done. If you haven't any thought for yourself, you might at least have a little concern for my health and my career."

He turned away as he finished, with a peevish gesture, and strolled off up the path, throwing a remark over his shoulder to the effect that they had kept lunch waiting

about an hour and he was darned hungry.

Fortescue, hot with disgust and anger, dared not look up at the woman beside him-dared not, until she spoke in a tone that cut him to the heart.

"I told you no one would be hurt but me."

There was no veil before the passion of his gaze then. At sight of her obvious distress, her whitened face, and stormy eyes, it had leapt up, flame-hot, unconcealable.

hoarsely. "Are your friends nothing to you? Would their pain—"

A hand, soft as rose petals, fluttered down to rest a moment on his where it lay on the horse's neck. He drew

a sharp breath at the touch of it.

"Forgive me," she said, very low and hurried. "My friends are all I have to make life worth living. I was wrong to think no one would grieve. You would care, I know----

" Care!" " Marion!"

It was her husband's voice breaking in, breaking the

spell, bringing back sanity, thank God!

The light died out of Fortescue's eyes as swiftly as it had sprung into being, his hand dropped. He took a quick

step backward.

"Of course we should all care," he said formally. hope you will remember, and not take the risk again. Let me help you down. I expect Ah Wing is wailing dismally over his spoilt lunch, and you must be nearly starving."

CHAPTER X

AFTER the shock of the morning Marion was glad to avail herself of Fortescue's suggestion, and retired to her room as soon as lunch was over to rest in readiness for the dance.

Gerald, as usual, spent the afternoon on the long couch which he induced Ah Wing to carry into the garden, but Fortescue stayed in the sitting-room, very busy in some mysterious fashion, and when the Holts put in an appearance at tea-time they found that the furniture had been rearranged, leaving a blank space in the corner between the

end window and the fireplace.

In reply to their surprised looks Fortescue remarked carelessly that he had bought a new cabinet, which some of the boys would bring up from the railroad presently, and quickly changed the conversation, chaffed Gerald for getting excited, teased Marion about the astonishing gowns she would see, remarking laughingly that he guessed Miss Dolly was even now decking herself out in her finery ready for her duties as hostess of her father's new hall.

Tea finished at last, Marion and Gerald went in to dress, leaving Fortescue to order the buggy which they were to

drive down in.

Marion was surprisingly slow over her toilette that evening, so slow that Gerald, the personification of fastidiousness in immaculate evening dress, asked her if she was out to conquer the *élite* of the town, and for once

congratulated her on her appearance.

When in an amiable mood he would take an interest in Marion's gowns, particularly those she wore for the stage. He had excellent taste both in colour and style, and it pleased him sometimes to indulge his fanciful schemes about the figure of his wife, admiring the result simply as a creation of his own mind.

Marion was no prude. She loved everything that was beautiful, including beautiful clothes, and, though she was at war with her husband on most points, she recognised his artistry in this, and more often than not acted upon his suggestion.

To his surprise—for as a rule she let his remarks pass without comment—she faced about at the word of praise

with a quick rain of breathless questionings.

"Does it suit me? Or shall I wear something darker?

Do these shoes go with it?"

As she stood back, he let his eyes run over her with the cool, dispassionate gaze of a critic, a look that changed slowly to something warmer. It may have been her softened expression, the glow of health and happiness, or the unexpected, intimate appeal, that brought the sudden realisation that she was a woman to be proud of, and, following quickly on the thought, the exclamation:

"My God! Marion, you look darned handsome to-night."

The remark was not in good taste, nor the look accompanying it one a refined woman would welcome, but, strangely enough, Marion seemed not to notice it. She flashed a glance at her reflection, slightly flushed, curiously excited.

"Handsome-do I?"

He caught the murmured words, and drew nearer, largely unconscious of what he did, swayed by the impulse of the moment.

"Yes-you look---"

He was very close, his newly awakened senses acutely aware of her loveliness and grace. The warm blood rushed to his brow as he bent over her, his hand fastening upon hers.

"Why, I-Marion-"

At his touch she swung round in an azement, drawing away her hand and stepping back. Absorbed in her thoughts, she had been oblivious to his rising emotion.

On such obscure moments do the lives of people rest. Had she yielded to him then, woven a new spell about him, the danger would have been averted from another that night; and had it come in other surroundings he might have won. But to-night, with that influence he little dreamt of dominating her mind, the memory of a face so different before her eyes, words recently spoken in her ears, he was doomed to disappointment.

He saw the look of wonder give place to that he knew so well—hard, cold, proudly disdainful—a look for which his own conduct was responsible. It was like an icy douche on his hot passion, that and the swift, stinging rebuke!

"Spare me your compliments, Gerald."

He tried to sneer, found she was paying no attention, and, with a muttered word, picked up his coat and lounged out into the passage, where he found his friend pacing to and fro.

Marion did not keep them waiting long. She came out in a moment, wrapped in her travelling-cloak, serene and smiling. If Fortescue had hoped to see a vision of beauty he was checked for the time being. He only glimpsed as he helped her into the buggy a pair of dainty silver shoes and a wisp of glistening material that defied his imagination.

The hall was open and dancing in progress by the time they reached it, Miss Dolly standing in the entrance-lobby surrounded by a crowd of young fellows all eager for favours.

The arrival of the strangers with the well-known figure of Fortescue created a diversion, and the girl hurried forward with outstretched hands.

"Oh, you've come at last! I was sure afraid you would

change your minds-"

She was a picture of joyous youth in her white dress, ordered for the occasion from a fashionable New York dressmaker, the cost of which had staggered Tom Costello. To judge from her sparkling eyes, she seemed well aware that it set off the golden curls and flushed, happy face to perfection.

She carried Marion away to the dressing-room, and the two men passed into the hall. It was crowded with dancers, and finding it impossible to move until the music ceased, they stood near the doorway watching the throng with interest, Gerald commenting drily on the different types in a way that set Fortescue's eyes twinkling with amusement.

The band stopped in a few minutes, and Tom Costello came up, bringing a troupe of girls and fellows to be introduced, and they soon found themselves surrounded by a laughing crowd—at least, the girls were laughing, the

men being inclined to jealousy at seeing their partners eager to get dances booked up by these "swelled heads." Suddenly one of the boys, glancing casually towards the

Suddenly one of the boys, glancing casually towards the entrance, gave a sharp exclamation of surprise and admiration.

"Look, everybody—here's a peach coming in with Dolly! Guess I dance with her before the night's out!"

All turned. Gerald laughed, and Fortescue started in wonder. The peach was Marion, and as she advanced down the room a buzz of comment broke out, for in this mixed assembly she looked a veritable queen among women.

Fortescue, standing at the back of the crowd, had ample time to feast his eyes while she stood smilingly acknowledging introductions, and he made good use of the opportunity. Not a detail of the shimmering gown of sea-green and silver escaped the keenness of his gaze, nor did his eyes miss the sparkle of jewels about the ivory throat, the wonderful fan of green and grey feathers.

He watched her steadily, waiting for her glance, trying

to compel it by the very intensity of his desire.

It came; and he wondered instantly what caused that half-startled look, and the swift lowering of the lids over the tell-tale eyes. The least conceited of men, Fortescue never dreamt that his own magnificent figure, rendered finer by his attire, had given her a shock of delight.

Under cover of the conversation he moved to her side.

"'She came, she saw, she conquered!'" he quoted, laughing, and she thrilled under the flash of the grey eyes, the flush deepening in her cheeks. "You've got all the town guessing," he added, "but you've no right to spring such transformations on your unprepared friends."

"Do I look nice?"—with an audacious flutter of the fan.

"Fishing for compliments! I'm surprised at you. You know very well all the women are as green as that feathery thing and the men devouring you with their eyes!"

"Cheat!" she laughed. "I didn't ask what others

were thinking-"

The smile died on his lips in a moment.

"Do you want me to tell you you are the lov---"

"Oh, no! no!--please---"

The jest had gone too far. Both realised it instantly, and only Fortescue's quick return to a normal tone saved an awkward pause. He took the dance-card from her fingers.

"How many left?"

"I--I've saved you two."

"As if that would content me!" He scribbled initials against half a dozen, ignoring her faint cry of protest. "I want at least ten, but I'm generous enough to give someone else an innings. Listen, there's the band."

His arm was about her, strong and masterful, and to the strains of a dreamy Hawaiian melody they swung down

the room, leaving Gerald and Dolly to follow.

Shaded lights played over the hall, rose-petals fell in showers, giving a touch of romantic gaiety to the scene, heart-beats throbbed to the haunting strains of the violins in that lilting, swaying waltz. Did Marion's heart feel the call of the hour?

Fortescue's eyes never left her face. He was unconscious of everything save that he held her in his arms, feeling each movement of the slender form, watching each breath as it left the parted lips. If he could only believe that slight quiver was because of his touch! That those eyes were veiled because she feared for him to read what he longed to read in their mysterious depths! But he could not, by any stretch of imagination, think it.

"Come out into the moonlight," he entreated, when it was over, and, with her hand on his arm, they passed out

into Costello's garden.

A pretty place it was, with flower-beds and water-basins, nooks made by overhanging trees, nooks occupied now by whispering, laughing couples making the most of the fleeting hour. As they trod the paths in silence they caught snatches of talk, the red glow of a cigarette, or the flash of a light dress. Small wonder if Fortescue groaned inwardly, thinking of the sweetness he was missing.

"I wonder where Dolly has disappeared to," Marion said presently, in a desire to relieve the tension of the moment.

Fortescue laughed slightly, glad to find a topic they could converse on easily.

"I reckon that's her white frock over there," nodding towards a distant corner. "I'll bet my hat she's got some youngster singing odes to her eyebrows—yes, there's his shirt-front. I think I'd cover that if I wanted to do my courting in the dark!"

Marion smiled, turning him in the opposite direction

by a gentle pressure.

"Let them enjoy themselves," she reproved him. "Look, there's a vacant seat by the fountain. Shall we sit down?"

No suspicion as to the identity of the hidden wooer disturbed her. All was good and fair to-night, except, deep down in her heart, that vague fear concerning this man beside her, a fear she forced under by an effort of will.

Fortescue, with the smoke of his cigarette forming an effective screen, watched her as she sat. Never had he seen

her so radiant.

"How sweet Dolly looked to-night," she was saying softly, her thoughts still following their little friend. "That dainty frock, and her hair and eyes"—the smile deepened—"and such a child!—so eager for praise, so pleased with her own appearance. I believe she could have hugged me for very joy at my few words of approbation."

Glancing up, she surprised an expression of gravity quite out of keeping with the lightness of the subject. Fortescue had taken the cigarette from his mouth and was staring

thoughtfully at the glowing end.

"Don't you think," he said slowly, "that she is too susceptible to admiration? We think of her as a pretty child, to be petted and made much of, but I have wondered lately if we do right."

He turned his grey eyes to Marion.

"Flattery, unchecked freedom, doubtful acquaintances—subtle dangers for a girl like Dolly, are they not?"

Marion was silent. He repeated, in some surprise:

"Don't you think so?"

"I—I hardly know," she began painfully. "It seems to me she is more safeguarded than—than many other women, Mr. Fortescue."

" Why so?"

"She is surrounded by love, plenty of friends, an

indulgent father—happy—care-free." Her voice shook, dropped to a lower key. "It is to the lonely woman, the disillusioned, disappointed soul that these dangers present themselves so insistently. One who has a craving for sympathy, the touch of joy that has somehow been missed——"

Neither spoke for a moment after that. Fortescue sat motionless, the cigarette held rigid between his fingers, face set. She was trying to convey a warning; her words were meant for him—a hidden entreaty to remember her

difficult life. He knew it.

"But I am sure Dolly is good and pure at heart, Mr. Fortescue," she continued more firmly; "and, being so, whatever temptations assail her, they will carry no weight. Let her have her little span of freedom, her hour of worship and admiration. They will so soon be over—so soon!" It was as if she implored him from the depths of her own bitter experience; and the listener's eyes darkened. "She is still sufficiently a child to win our hearts in a childish way. Her innocence, her absolute frankness and fearlessness, will be her salvation. What man could betray one so confiding and sweet? Oh, I know how bad men can be"—and again that look like the blight of winter swept across the face beside her—"but it seems to me that the worst man ever made would hardly dare to drag such purity in the mire. Don't let her grow old too soon!"

She smiled up at him—a smile that seemed to say: "It is like you, best of all good friends, to take this interest

in a motherless girl."

Fortescue read it so, and the slow colour crept up beneath

the tan on his face.

"Thank God you understand my motives better than Gerald," he said very low; and then was instantly sorry, sorry to have mentioned that name when she was knowing a moment's peace of mind, for as he uttered it the bright look vanished, the hand she had laid beseechingly on his arm dropped to her side.

"Gerald has not the same outlook on life as you," she said unemotionally, face and voice steadily composed, adding after a brief pause: "It seems to have turned a

little chilly; shall we go back to the dancing, Mr. Fortescue?"

Dances grave, dances gay—then supper, the four of them together, Dolly bubbling with laughter, and Gerald high-spirited to the point of recklessness. After that the quiet ride home through the moonlit, silent country at ten o'clock; for Marion had insisted on early hours, at which Gerald had been inclined to rebel, until Fortescue stepped in, reminding him of his still-delicate condition.

At the garden gate he put them down, telling them to hurry in out of the night air, suddenly finding something

that required attention with his horses.

A long, long waiting as they passed up the flower-edged path into the house. Standing motionless, he swore to himself that he could hear the glad cry of surprise and pleasure she gave as they entered the lamp-lit sitting-room.

Waiting-waiting-with tight-clenched hands and long-

drawn breath.

A ripple of sound in the stillness—exquisite, wonderful—as if all the birds of spring had broken spontaneously into song, trilling for the very joy of living, increasing in rapture until the whole wide space about him was full of its sweetness. Could such notes be called into being by the touch of a man's fingers?

Softer now, like the murmur of the sea, rising, falling, then the rippling chords again, and—oh, God! that voice tearing at his very heart-strings, sending the blood hammering to his temples, where the sweat was breaking out with the effort for self-control—that voice, rich, powerful and passionate, speaking of love—love that could never be his.

"Shall I take the buggy round, boss?"

It was another voice at his elbow, breaking in like a discordant note amid the harmony, jarring on his sensitive ear.

His foreman, Bob Walton, stood beside him, his approach unheard by his employer; and as Fortescue's eyes met the steady blue ones watching him he knew that here was one who guessed his secret, read his thoughts unerringly, and for once lost, in a measure, control of the situation.

"The buggy?" he stammered, and his hand went up

to his head in a slight, uncertain gesture of momentary bewilderment and something very like panic. "Yes, yes, of course." He was trying hard to pull himself together. "There was something I wanted to see you about—oh, I remember, Mrs. Holt's horse." He threw back his head as if he openly challenged that look on Walton's face.

"What about the horse?"

"She tells me Brandon has charge of it. I thought that was your job. You know I don't like him handling our horses."

"Yep, I told Brandon off to do it—"
"Why? You know I'd prefer—"

And hotly, impulsively, the words rushed out, impelled by the very force of his devotion.

"I ain't got time, like some folks, to run about after

other men's wiv-"

He stopped abruptly, checked by that awful look. It was not anger. He would rather have been floored by a blow from his outraged boss than witness that terrible expression of pain. It cooled his temper in a moment, leaving him standing miserably wondering, with burning face, if he had offended beyond all hope of pardon.

Then a firm hand was laid upon his shoulder, and Fortescue's voice, very kind but grave, answered him in

a way that brought a suspicious lump into his throat.

"We've known each other too long, boy, for that sort of thing. An insult to myself I could forgive, but not against her, Bob. I warn you not to try my temper that way."

"D'you think I care 'bout her?' cried Bob passionately." It's you—you! Don't you see it's no damn good? Can't you see what it means? You ain't sech a fool as to——"

A faint smile, infinitely more moving than tears, crossed

the fine features.

"Know?" said Fortescue slowly. "I reckon so, Bob—and I'm just that kind of a fool, to keep on caring, knowing the cost. Keep on! As if I could stay myself! As easy stop a runaway train downhill!"

Something in the boy's quivering face touched him, holding back the flow of words. Why drag another into his trouble? Bad enough for one to suffer—as he was suffering.

He turned away, trying to speak more lightly.

"There! don't fret yourself, old pal; I'll pull through somehow."

Bob stood motionless by the gate until the house door had closed behind the boss. Then, as if compelled, he pushed it open and walked stealthily up the garden-path, treading as lightly as a cat, and along the verandah without a sound to the sitting-room windows.

There he hesitated a moment, with the look of a man who feels he is doing something not quite straightforward and honest, but as the rippling notes rang out again in the still air he took a sudden resolute step forward, and with his face close to the glass looked into the lamp-lit room.

He could see the shining grand piano—Fortescue's new cabinet, brought from the railroad that evening—Gerald before it in his immaculate attire, his white hands on the keyboard and head thrown back. By his side stood Marion, a Marion Bob had never seen before, a Marion dressed as poor, simple Bob had only dimly imagined women could dress, wearing jewels that flashed and sparkled with every breath she drew, her eyes shining like stars, and still holding between her fingers the wonderful fan of shaded feathers. Fortescue's arms had held her that night, Fortescue's eyes had feasted themselves on that beauty, Fortescue's ears had been filled with the sweetness of her voice—Bob knew! And his face paled as he stood there, rigid, drinking his fill.

Satisfied at last, he crept softly away and stole back to the gate. Once there, he drew in a long breath like a spent swimmer who has reached the shore, and, looking back towards those lighted windows, struck the fence

with his clenched hand, his blue eyes ablaze.

"I wish ter God you'd never come 'ere, Marion Holt! I never harmed a woman yet, but I wish ter God you'd died afore you brought that look upon his face! God!"—a note of puzzled scorn crept into the sturdy voice as he lifted his gaze to the moonlit skies—"I dunno what You was thinking of ter let her come—I sure don't!—fer You might ha' knowed! You might ha' knowed!"

CHAPTER XI .

A MONTH passed—a glorious, early summer month. Birds sang their joyous songs in the trees, which were now in full splendour of leaf, the grass grew tall and richly green in the fields, and the crops throve, giving indication of a plentiful harvest.

The whole ranch teemed with life at this time. There were still further seeding operations to put in hand, young stock and poultry that needed attention, and many repairs

to outbuildings and fences.

There was not an idle pair of hands in the place. Hard work was the order of the day, and no one shirked it. There was always to be heard the cheerful whistle of men employed on congenial tasks, the sound of hearty laughter and ringing voices raised in friendly discussion or argument.

Under such ideal conditions, aided by a spell of wonderful weather, the most jaded soul in the world must surely

revive; and Gerald Holt proved no exception.

Daily growing stronger, he began to take short walks at first, each time increasing the distance without feeling undue fatigue, until, at the end of the second month, he was able to get farther afield, and quite often took a trip down town, returning in high spirits, as if he was finding

the stay more enjoyable.

Strangely enough, he seemed to prefer to go alone, usually slipping away when his host was absent, and his wife, finding there were no ill-effects, was not the one to raise objections when he announced his intention of taking a ramble on his own. She knew he had no desire for her society at any time, and, her leisure being wholly taken up with her own pursuits, she had no great longing for his.

The only fly in the ointment for her at this time was a large and singularly unpleasant one in the shape of the before-mentioned rancher named Brandon, who continued to subtly annoy her by divers ways and means, though why he should do so was something of a mystery. There is no doubt he had in the first place mistaken the type of woman she was, and, finding his familiarity strongly resented, had made up his mind to make her pay for it. It rankled, too, that she had been present on several occasions when Fortescue had found it necessary to reprimand him severely.

Whatever the cause, and despite her obvious dislike, he continued to hit on every pretext for crossing her path, and she was made uncomfortably aware of covert looks and suggestive remarks whenever they met, which was fairly

frequently.

Unwilling to appeal to Fortescue, she tried to deal with the situation unaided, but her air of dignity had little effect.

Determined not to meet him alone at the stables, she told him to bring Silver Star to the garden gate in future

when she took her morning ride.

Of course he protested vigorously, a fact she resolutely ignored, knowing he dared not go so far as to boldly disobey. Instead, he retaliated by keeping her waiting, hoping to have the satisfaction of breaking down the outward calm which was such a source of annoyance to him. He succeeded at last. There came a morning when, patience and temper alike thoroughly exhausted, Marion set off for the stables with flaming cheeks, ready to settle the matter once and for all.

Her anger by no means appeased at seeing the man in question lolling unconcernedly against the stable door, she hurried forward with such obvious indignation that he instinctively straightened up, throwing away the butt-end

of a cigarette.

"Mr. Brandon," she exclaimed hotly, "how much longer do you propose keeping me waiting? Twenty minutes I have stood in the road; and this is the fourth morning you have made me late for my ride. I shall have to report you if it occurs again. Do you hear?"—as he made no reply.

"I ain't deaf, as I knows of!" he drawled.

"Defective in sense, anyway! I told you yesterday I should not excuse you again."

"Bet you don't tell Fortescue--"

"Mr. Fortescue to you. You are greatly mistaken if you think I shall keep on taking your insults, Brandon. I'm not afraid of you, or afraid to speak, if you go too far. If you value your job it will pay you to be more careful. I warn you for the last time. Get my horse out at once!"

"S'pose I don't?" He lounged back into his former

attitude.

Marion shrugged her shoulders.

"It's quite a matter of indifference to me," she said lightly. "You may be sure I shall speak to Mr. Fortescue if you refuse."

He laughed, running his bold eyes over her.

"Why don't you?" he asked pointedly. "You bin goin' to often enough, but that's as fer as you git! 'Fraid he'll git mad jealous an' do somethin' desprit?"

"That's another of your insulting remarks."
"Insulting?" Again that irritating drawl.

"Yes—and a lying insinuation! Mr. Fortescue will know how to answer it when he dismisses you, which you may be quite certain he will do when I tell him of your continued insolence. I gave you a chance just now, but after that I withdraw it. I shall report the matter to the boss at once!"

There was an ugly look on Brandon's face. Beginning to understand she meant business, he took a step nearer, clenching a brawny fist.

"You do!" he menaced. "You'll regret it to your

dying day, I'll bet a dollar!"

Marion laughed. Somehow her courage had come back to her this morning. She felt no longer afraid of this hulking brute.

"Do you think either Mr. Fortescue or I care anything

at all for your paltry threats?"

"Reckon you'll have cause to--"

"What do you propose doing? Shooting on sight? Or a knife in the back?"

The icy contempt stung deep, turning him savage.

"No! I figur' thet ain't the way ter hurt either of you, you little devil! It'd mean lynching fer me. But what

about if I let folks know, quietly like, about the nice goin's on up on the ranch, eh? Love-making an' sech, while a certin gentleman's away down town thinkin' as how he ken trust his wife! An' presents of horsesvalu'ble horses-an' pianos-an' ridin' whips-an' lonely rides every day where no one ken see." No escape from that dreadful voice, that jeering face. "tell them 'bout how John Fortescue"
"Mr. Brandon!"

"How John Fortescue, the straight guy, what brags bout how he never done a man down—tell em how he

carries on with his own pal's w---"

The vile wretch had drawn nearer at every word, so close that his hot breath fanned the white, shrinking face, a face full of such horror that the meanest creature on God's earth must surely have felt a tinge of shame and pity.

But before he could complete the sentence the expression changed. Fool! to forget the whip held in the small hand, to overlook its effectiveness! And two great weals came up on the grinning face where the desperate cuts fell.

Checked by the force of the unexpected blows, Brandon staggered back, flinching from the sting of the lash; only for a moment. The next he recovered, and sprang forward,

mad with rage.

Thoroughly alarmed now at the devil she had raised, Marion turned to fly, unable, in her panic, to keep back

a cry for help.

It was not in vain. As his hand grasped her by the shoulder a man's voice rang out on the still air, and there came the sound of running feet.

The next instant she was clinging to Bob Walton's sturdy arm, Brandon measuring his length on the floor, felled by

a knock-out blow from Bob's revengeful fist.

Silence for a moment and then Bob, very cool and unruffled, though he was deadly pale, said:

"Reckon you'd best clear, ma'am, I can deal with this

chap."

"Don't fight, Bob-please!"

"Fight? Don't you fret 'bout that! I'm only goin' ter be a bit playful." And as she ran away he very deliberately rolled up his sleeves, adjusted them to a nicety, and, with a look of grim delight, set about thoroughly enjoying himself.

Meanwhile Fortescue, having finished superintending the branding of some young calves, waited patiently awhile for Marion to join him as usual at the appointed time and place, it not being always possible for him to start straight away from the house after breakfast; but, finding she still failed to put in an appearance, he turned Marquis in that direction and went slowly back, fully expecting to meet her on the road.

There was no sign of her, and, somewhat disturbed, he quickened his horse into a trot. What could have kept her? She had never before disappointed him. Lately, it is true, she had been behind time, but she had not failed to come.

No sign of her at the house. The sitting-room was deserted, also the kitchen, Ah Wing being hard at work shaking mats on the patch of waste ground at the back.

Fortescue went through and yelled to the boy from the

steps.

"Ah Wing, where's Missie Holt?"

With his bland face expressing as much of surprise as it ever did, Ah Wing dropped the rug he was holding and ran forward.

"Ah Wing not know! Ah Wing not see Missie Holt

after she go to stable."

"She went to the stables, then? Was she dressed for riding?"

Ah Wing nodded. "All velly nicee!"

"That'll do!" Fortescue dismissed the boy curtly and

turned into the house again.

Back in the hall he paused at the Holts' bedroom door, and after a moment's deliberation tapped on it gently. Getting no answer, he turned the handle. To his surprise the door was locked on the inside, and, roused into alarm, he shook it slightly, calling insistently as he did so.

"Mrs. Holt! Mrs. Holt! Are you there?"

There was no reply for a moment, but as he repeated it, louder, a stifled voice made itself heard from the room—Marion's voice.

"Please go away !"

Absolutely dumbstruck, Fortescue pushed back the wide hat from his forehead and stared at the unyielding wood in blank dismay. This was altogether a new proposition. What *could* be the matter, he asked himself. To come home and lock herself in! Unheard-of proceeding!

"Say," with another tap on the door, "what about your

ride? I've been waiting for you some time."

Again an interval of silence before the answer came back. "I am not going this morning"—and something breaking in, something suspiciously like a sob—"I don't feel well—"

Fortescue's lips drew together in a soundless whistle of bewilderment as he plucked off his hat and passed an uncertain hand over his dark head, a trick he had when in doubt or embarrassed. Not well! She had looked the picture of health only an hour ago!

"Shall I go for the doctor?" was the only thing he could think of to say. If she felt ill she must surely want to

see a doctor.

"Certainly not!" The answer was quick enough this time, and as irritable as if it had emanated from Gerald.

" Please go away !"

There seemed nothing else to do but obey, and Fortescue, frowning, puzzled, and disappointed, wandered out, turning events over in his mind in an endeavour to

arrive at a solution of the mystery.

Someone was obviously responsible for the remarkable change that had taken place in such a short time, and as he hung over the garden gate, moodily filling his pipe, his thoughts naturally turned to the usual source of trouble, namely Gerald, and said many unpleasant things about that for once perfectly innocent gentleman, who had taken himself off immediately after breakfast for one of his vague rambles.

Fortescue never liked to feel baffled. Something had

happened, that was certain. What could it be? He went over every action, every word that had been spoken, but could find nothing to account for this sudden difference. Then he remembered that Gerald left the house first. That did away with the idea of the fault being his. And when he, Fortescue, went out she was apparently quite happy. Then what the devil was it? Perhaps—perhaps she was ill! He grew alarmed again instantly. Where the deuce was Gerald? The fellow was always missing when he was wanted. Had he better get the doctor on chance? Suppose she'd caught a chill and developed pneumonia, or something else equally horrible! Better go up to the house again and have another try.

His cogitations were abruptly interrupted by the sight of Bob Walton, a grimly determined looking Bob Walton, coming up the dusty road before him, driving along at the business end of his gun a much-subdued and mutilated rancher whom he speedily recognised as Brandon—a very different creature now to the bold bully who had confronted

Marion Holt.

Fortescue's brow darkened as he watched them approach, for he was in no very good humour this morning. What mischief had his old enemy been up to now?

He gave Bob a sharply enquiring glance as they drew

near.

"Hello, Bob, what's the trouble?"

Bob grinned cheerfully. He was slightly dishevelled, and one of his knuckles was bleeding, but he looked like a man who had been doing grand work and was fully satisfied with the result.

"Reckon you'd best ask this 'ere cuss!" he said briefly, but with considerable relish. "An' when you've done it you can sure work out a little sum—'bout what his pay amounts to—as I figur' you'll be tellin' him ter git!"

Fortescue turned his keen, grey eyes on the culprit's face, noting the raw, swollen ridges of flesh, the discoloured, half-closed eyes, and badly cut chin, other thoughts driven

from mind for the moment.

"Wal," he remarked, after the inspection, a glimmer of a smile lurking about his lips, "looks to me as if someone has been spoiling your beauty; and made a pretty good job of it, too! Been fighting?"—in the casual tone of one merely asking a mild enquiry.

No answer, only a lowering, evil look that boded ill for

the future.

"Him fight?" cried Bob in scornful incredulity. "He ain't got pluck enough ter fight—not a man, anyway!" And then, in response to the renewed questioning in Fortescue's gaze: "What d'you think put them marks

on his ugly mug, boss?"
"Can't say!" Fortescue returned slowly, his eyes narrowing ominously, as if the words had given him a vague clue. He looked again at the ridges on Brandon's downcast face, bars of livid flesh across the cheek just under the left eye. "Come, Bob, out with it!"

"Reckon them marks look to me surprisin' like as if someone had took the whip hand to him," Bob drawled.

Fortescue started violently, and took a hasty step nearer. Bob, unperturbed, but holding himself ready for emergencies, continued at the same lazy pace.

"I figur' there's only one party on this 'ere ranch what's likely ter use one in that fashion—don't 'spect this skunk'll brag much 'bout how a woman had ter give him a hiding!"

A moment of tense silence while Fortescue grasped the

full significance of Bob's words, then:

"You devil!"

The concentrated passion in the low voice, the blaze of fury in the keen eyes and livid face turned upon him, made Brandon hurriedly recoil, throwing up his arms in an instinctive gesture of self-defence. The boss was always a startling object to wrongdoers, but this morning his appearance was absolutely terrifying, particularly to the individual before him, whose courage mostly lay in bluff. Well for him that Fortescue had strength enough to control the passion of wrath that beset him as he realised the meaning of Marion's locked door and sobbing voice. Greatly angered he had often been, but never before had he felt this terrible impulse to kill surging through his veins. He hardly knew how he managed to keep his hands from the other man's throat. Perhaps it was only

the consciousness of a certain sturdy figure poised ready, of a pair of bright blue eyes steadily watching him, that held him back.

"Take your coat off, if there's an ounce of manhood left in you, and put your fists up!" Adding, hardly, as Brandon looked shiftily round for a way of retreat, do you want me to knock you down same as Bob did?"

"Reckon he's had enough, boss," interjected Bob quietly. "Don't fret yourself bout him—I gave him something he won't forget in a hurry! Jest give him his pay up ter date-"

"I'm in your debt, Bob! But he's got to learn yet

what it means to insult a woman on my land---"

"He's learnt it! There ain't no occasion fer you ter add to it."

There was such deliberate significance in the manner of saying it that Fortescue swung round to face his foreman, annoyance manifest in the look he gave him; but Bob was undismayed.
"'Tain't your job!" he said calmly, but with a peculiar

emphasis on the words that Fortescue seemed to think

it wise not to disregard.

Without another word he took a roll of bills from his pocket, counted out the amount Bob told him was due to Brandon, and thrust them into the man's half-fearfully outstretched hand.

Only as he took them his anger flared out again in a low,

furious utterance.

"There's your pay-now clear, you cur! Let me hear of your face being seen within ten miles of this ranch and look out for trouble! If you value your dirty skin steer wide of me, for, by God! if I come up against you a second time there'll be no escape!"

Brandon went—running!—being given a good send-off by a heavy riding-boot, thankful to get away whole, but swearing vengeance, for all Fortescue's warning, in his

black soul.

Both men stood in silence watching him well out of sight. When he had become quite lost in the distance Fortescue, with set face and steely eyes, turned to his foreman:

"Who gave you authority to dictate to me?" he asked

quietly.

Bob flushed hotly, though he held himself manfully, for he had plenty of grit. The tone did not deceive him for a moment. He knew the boss was seriously put out, strongly resenting his interference, but, if it meant the loss

of his job, Bob was determined to have his say.

"You can't deny it weren't your job, boss!" he stammered. "Reckon if Mrs. Holt wants defending she's got a husband behind her, ain't she? You make me sick sometimes—you do, straight! D'you want her name mixed up with yours down town? For God's sake try an' act reasonable!"

A touch of dull colour crept into Fortescue's cheeks. The hot words were like a slap in the face, true as he knew them to be. His nerves were on edge this morning, or he would not have answered as he did.

"Damn your impudence!" he said violently. "When I need someone to look after my reputation I'll send for you! Until I do, keep your mouth shut!" And flung away down the road.

Poor Bob! He was finding the morning particularly rousing, and, though he did not often indulge in bad language, he could not resist giving vent to his feeling as he gazed after the retreating figure.

" Wal I'm---"

He stopped abruptly. Marion stood beside him, having come out to ascertain the result of the interview, and now said:

"What happened, Bob? Did he-"

"Yep, cleared him out-"

"Oh," she seemed to choke something back—"I wish it hadn't——"

"You ain't got no call to worry. We bin wantin' ter

git rid of him. He don't suit here."

"Then why did you let him look after Silver Star?"

It was an unexpected question. Bob swallowed something and went furiously red under the enquiring look.

"I was busy," he stammered lamely. His eyes avoided hers, and he stood shuffling an uneasy foot to and fro. "I—I got sorta puzzled and worried like——" He looked up, suddenly meeting her glance with one that was very straight and honest for all its boyish embarrassment.

"Y' see," he said bluntly, "I got real jealous, an' I had

ter take it out on you somehow!"

"Jealous?" She echoed it in wide-opened surprise.

"But why? What have I done?"

There was genuine dismay and innocence in the tone. Bob was taken aback by it; but, having started, he was not going to retreat.

"Well, maybe I weren't so much jealous as riled. Seemed

ter me you weren't sorta---"

"Would you mind explaining a little more clearly? I

can't---''

"Sure, I'm coming to it right now. I kinda got it inter my head that you was one o' them vampire women y' know, but now I ken see it weren't that, but just a sorta—a sorta—well, carelessness more. I reckon it's because you ain't realised yet what our boss is like, Mrs. Holt." A faint cry escaped her, but he ignored it, continuing with slow earnestness. "Y' see, he ain't no kid, fer one thing, an', fer another, he don't meet many women like you out here. You're what you'd call kinda unique in these parts. An' he's a man what ain't had no soft feeling fer a woman yet. It's gotta come to us all, I reckon. But, believe me, he takes things more serious than some of us. He'd sure git hurt quick, an' most men—""

He quaked inwardly at that look on her face, white now as the day she came, but her silence emboldened him to

say a few more words.

"O' course I figur' it's a woman's job ter make men admire her, specially if she's got the looks an' the air. I don't blame no woman fer that—it's natural. But he ain't like other men, Mrs. Holt. He jest wouldn't dream o' treatin' things light. Maybe you'd never cotton on ter how he was feeling, because he'd never do anythin' that wasn't dead straight, but I want you ter know it'd go deep an' hard with sech as him."

"I—I think you're making a mistake—"

"Oh, I ain't sayin' as how he's in love with you." The lofty tone might have made her smile on any other occasion but this. "I'm only jest tellin' you what made me wild—an' askin' you ter—ter play a straight game—ter act on the square—if you ken ask a woman ter act that way."

A wave of hot colour swept across her face, fading as

swiftly, leaving her deathly pale.

"I—I suppose I ought to be very angry with you, Bob," she said faintly. "But, somehow, I can't!" She laughed mirthlessly, a laugh forced out to cover the pain that threatened to master her. "I—I know you mean well, though you're not exactly polite about it."

Very red again, and suddenly shamed, he broke in

hastily:

"I sure didn't mean ter be rude, Mrs. Holt; but if you thought the world o' someone you jest couldn't stand by an' watch his heart break without sayin' a word, could

you?"

"If you knew what it costs to keep silent! If you knew what it means to stifle every word, check every look! To deem me careless, unmindful of his trouble! Oh, Bob! Bob! spare me a little of your pity!"

CHAPTER XII

In a passion of resentment and pain Fortescue marched away down the road, caring little where his steps led, conscious only of one fact, that all his world had fallen to pieces through his own idiocy in retaining a man he had instinctively disliked from the first.

He hardly dared to imagine what had occurred, what insults Marion had been subjected to. Suppose the vile beast had dared to lay hands on her! Fool! to listen to Bob instead of hammering the breath out of that

devil.

He was hotly annoyed with his foreman for that, and for his outspoken remarks. How dared he interfere! What business was it of his? To suggest that he had no right to protect her! Was he, then, to stand by and not lift a hand in her defence! No, by heaven! If such a thing occurred again he would put a bullet through the offender.

Ah! that was the thought rankling deeper than any other—he had no right—no right! Surely she would not blame him. She had seemed so distant when she answered, so remote. Perhaps, womanlike, in a revulsion of feeling, she would take a dislike to the place and think about going home—or perhaps she would class him with his man, as a rough, country boor unfit for her society! You never knew how women would take things.

A sharp half an hour's tramp cooled him into a semblance of outward calm; but when he put in an appearance among the boys they could testify to the fact that the boss was in "a devil of a temper" about something. His eyes were as keen as an eagle's for the slightest fault, his tongue like a lash whipping them into renewed energy. They squirmed under it, but none dared to brave him by a sharp answer in that humour. Nor did they wish to. They knew something of a serious nature had occurred to upset him to such an extent, and their silent sympathy made

them forbearing. All the same, they heaved a sigh of relief to see the tall figure disappear at dinner-time.

Strains of music drifting out from the sitting-room windows as Fortescue approached the house told him that Gerald had returned from his ramble, and when he entered he found his friend seated at the piano, wrapped in some mystic inspiration, with Marion near by sewing some piece of delicate material as if nothing untoward had happened.

She did not look up on hearing the door open, if anything, her head lowered still farther over her work, and as Gerald made no attempt to speak there was a somewhat awkward stillness in the room, broken at last by Ah Wing with his

loaded tray.

The boy seemed equally morose as he served them, and Fortescue again began to lose his temper at the black cloud that seemed to have descended on them all, and more than once rated him soundly for something quite trivial in a way that made Marion glance swiftly up and away again.

Fortescue tried in vain to catch one of those elusive looks, seeking an opening for conversation, but she avoided his gaze every time, and the pale face and slightly reddened eyes stayed him from making too many advances.

Gerald was preoccupied and moody, a contrast to his manner of late, which had been surprisingly gay. He certainly made one or two careless remarks at intervals, mostly in reply to questions from Fortescue, who tried to keep things going, one of which was to the effect that he had accidentally run across Dolly Costello, who would be calling later on.

Finding his friend made no attempt to leave the room, Fortescue flung out aga n after dinner, and spent a most miserable afternoon in a quiet spot up by the creek, with

only his old pipe for companion.

He had found no opportunity of having a word with Marion alone, and as the other girl was coming to tea he told himself that it was no use hanging about there in the hope of getting one until she had departed. But he meant to thresh the matter out, for by her attitude he thought Marion was seriously angry with him for the incident of

the morning, and the idea was unbearable.

Sure enough Dolly Costello was installed in the sittingroom at tea-time. Fortescue greeted her kindly, as was his wont, and tried to make himself agreeable, but even that meal was something of a failure, the conversation

flagging drearily at times.

Dolly indeed seemed touched with the same complaint as the rest of them. She had very little to say, and was unusually shy and awkward in her answers to Marion, who seemed quite composed again, though quiet. Fortescue, eyeing them both from his end of the table, thought what a contrast in every way the two women

presented.

Marion had changed her white blouse and neat skirt for a soft gown of delicate mauve, the colour of Neapolitan violets, her only ornament a long string of carved amber, and Fortescue, though he openly admitted he knew nothing about fashion, felt instinctively, as men often do, that her attire was "just right." But the rather showy pink dress of the younger girl, the string of pearls round the plump, pretty throat, and the high-heeled flashy shoes, offended his quiet taste.

Dolly was certainly taking more interest in clothes lately, he reflected, and innocently put it down to Marion's influence, though he decided she was not an apt pupil. That the frock was probably expensive and the pearls undoubtedly real roused no suspicious thoughts, for old

Tom Costello in no way stinted his daughter.

Bob had noticed those pearls. Meeting Dolly at the gate, his quick eyes had fastened upon them, a keen glance, followed by one of his usual direct remarks.

"See you got a new necklace, Miss Dolly."

The girl had flushed a little, but her innate love of admiration made her expansive for the moment. Twisting them between her fingers restlessly, she said with almost childish eagerness:

"Do you like them, Bob?"

"Sure! They're not bad. You'd almost think they was real—"

"Of course they're real! They cost---"

And then an abrupt closing of the pretty mouth, a deepening of the hot flush. Bob saw it, and wondered, though he only said casually:

"You'll ruin your old dad."

To that she had vouchsafed no reply, making some excuse to escape into the house away from him. But, months after, Bob remembered, and understood more

clearly.

Tea over, Gerald went to the piano, for which Fortescue was devoutly thankful, as his friend's dreamy playing covered the lack of conversation and gave them all a good reason for sitting in silence. Marion certainly had her needlework in hand, but as the light faded she let it fall into her lap and lay back in her chair, and Dolly was seemingly absorbed in the book of photographs belonging to the Holts. What excuse could Fortescue invent to obtain that long-desired chat with Marion? Should he ask her to take a walk with him in the garden? No, that would hardly do; he could not invite her without the others; and, even if they refused, one of the boys was almost sure to butt in. What could he do? Presently he would have to see Dolly home, and that would mean the evening gone. See Dolly home—ah! he had it!

As the clock struck eight Fortescue glanced at it and then at Dolly, a smile he hoped inwardly looked natural

curving his lips.

"Eight o'clock, Miss Dolly!"

"Yes." She rose from her chair with a half-nervous air. "I—I'd best be going, Mr. Fortescue. I told Dad I'd be home early. You don't mind, do you, Mrs. Holt?"

"Of course not, my dear," said Marion. "Stay as long as you like, but I think it is getting rather dark for you to

be out late—"

"That's so," Fortescue interjected quietly, praying that no one would notice his eagerness. "I was going to suggest that you saw Miss Dolly on her way, Gerald; I have one or two things to see to—"

If Dolly reddened it passed unnoticed in the twilight, as did the start of surprise from Gerald at the unexpected

suggestion. He recovered in a moment, saying with somewhat forced pleasantness that gave an impression of bored indifference:

"Oh, certainly—if Miss Costello can manage to put up with my company," and laughed slightly. Standing beside Dolly in the bedroom while the girl adjusted her hat to her own satisfaction, Marion suddenly spoke in such a strangely serious tone that the latter dropped her hands and looked up with face gone quite pale and alarmed.

"Dolly, I want to say something to you."

" To me? "

If Marion had not been full of other things she might have noticed that quick drawing back, the fluttering glance, almost like a frightened bird caught in a trap.

"Yes; it's about Brandon."

"Brandon?" And, "Brandon?" she said again with

a faint sigh—was it of relief?

"Yes, Brandon. I expect you will wonder why I mention him to you; but, you see, Mr. Fortescue once said to me that he thought he was rather too fond of hanging about your father's saloon, and I felt I ought to give you a word of warning before you go——"

"Has he done something wrong, then, Mrs. Holt?"

"Yes," Marion continued earnestly, anxious to impress the girl. "He has been most objectionable to me since I came, and this morning he quite overstepped the mark, with the result that Mr. Fortescue dismissed him before lunch, so I understand. I just wanted to tell you, because, having nothing to do now, he will probably be about the town, and I do ask you, Dolly, not to have anything to do with him. I feel sure he is bad right through—no fit companion for a young girl. Will you promise not to speak to him if you should see him?"

Dolly flushed hotly under the older woman's eyes.

"I—I don't like Brandon," she stammered hurriedly.
"You needn't be scared I'll talk to him. I'll promise

you I won't if it'll please you, Mrs. Holt."

Marion smiled kindly as she gazed into the pretty, troubled face with its slightly quivering lips and downcast eyes. It suddenly struck her that Dolly was not looking

quite so well as usual, not so joyous, and a little added

tenderness crept into her voice.

"Of course it will please me, dear. I don't want you to get into any trouble if I can give you a little advice. We like our friends to be happy if we can make them so. Is there anything worrying you now?"

" N-o i"

"You are quite sure? You know how willingly I would help you."

The girl looked up, a strange, wild light flaring in her

eyes.

"I wish you wasn't so good, Mrs. Holt!" The passionate words seemed wrung out of her in a very agony of emotion, emotion almost unnecessary under such simple circumstances. "You make me feel ashamed when I think how kind you've been to me, and I don't deserve it—I don't—I don't—oh, I wish I was a better girl than I am! I would be if I had all you have—indeed I would!"

Greatly surprised and vaguely troubled at the outburst, Marion laid a soothing hand on the excited girl's shoulder.

"Why, Dolly, my dear, are you such a wicked little girl, then?" Adding gravely, as the only response was a convulsive shudder: "You must not talk like that; and please don't call me good, because I'm very far from being perfect. We all have our temptations, temptations I hope you will never encounter, but we must try to overcome them, and be as good as we can."

Still no answer, only another low sob; it sounded like

a sob of despair.

"You must not envy me, either, Dolly, envy always makes for unhappiness. What have I that you would like for

yourself?"

"You've got everything!" said Dolly in a choked whisper. "Lovely clothes, plenty of money, a beautiful home, I expect, and a "—whatever word she was about to use was hurriedly changed—" and a good husband."

A good husband! Oh, innocent Dolly—so young—so

ignorant.

"Poor child!" Marion murmured. She roused herself from her dark brooding. "Why, what a foolish little girl

it is!" she said tenderly. "Why, my dear, you've all the joys to come, if you only knew—no, not all, for if you only thought about it calmly you would discover how lucky you are now, with such a good father to give you everything you want. I'm nearly ten years older than you, Dolly. Perhaps you forget that. By the time you are my age Mr. Right will have come along and life for you be much brighter and happier than for me."

Dolly raised her head. It gave Marion a sudden shock, that expression of dumb anguish and tragedy revealed for the first time in the drooping corners of the lips, the

dark rings under the wide blue eyes.

"I guess Mr. Right don't come twice!" she said bitterly.

" Dolly ! "

Marion stood aghast after that one exclamation, absolutely taken by surprise. What did the poor child mean? Her words suggested that she had set her heart on the unattainable—at eighteen! Oh, surely not—surely not! Yet what else could cause that unmistakable look of grief?

"Won't you tell me what you mean?" she asked gently.

"Is there someone you love?"

A slight pause before that brief nod of confirmation.

"Doesn't he love you, Dolly?"

A shrug of the shoulders, half petulant, half defiant, and a quick, furtive glance at the earnest face beside her.

"Reckon he's too fine for a girl like me."

"Won't you tell me? Perhaps I can help you-"

"You help!" She shook her head. "You couldn't. No one can help me—and you'd understand least of anybody. I'm not going to tell you."

A thought had come to Marion, born of that faint clue, "Guess he's too fine for me!" Alas! that only one name

should present itself to her mind.

"Is it Mr. Fortescue?" she asked quickly, with a strange surge of feeling sending the colour to her cheek and her

heart beating more than a shade faster.

Dolly looked up with a startled air. To Marion it seemed like the start of one found out, and, despite the answer, told herself that she was not far wrong.

"Mr. Fortescue? No-no-of course not! Why?" And then, as if afraid of betraying something, the face hardened rebelliously. "I'll not say. You've no right to ask me. It's not your business."

The girl was instantly sorry, for Marion drew back like one stabbed, with a quiver of the lip and a world of pain in her dark eyes, but she would not apologise, only hung her head in sullen silence, a silence broken by the older

"Of course it's your secret, Dolly. I had no intention of intruding into your private affairs. Are you quite

ready? I expect Mr. Holt is getting impatient."

Pitiful misunderstanding, whereby the girl lost her chance of confiding in the only one who could have helped her, and Marion never learnt the mistake she made until it was too late.

It was Marion's intention when the others were gone to slip back to her bedroom away from Fortescue, for she had sensed his move, and guessed that the plea he had put forward was a mere excuse. She was unsuccessful. As the door closed behind her husband and Dolly the man swung round, barring her exit, determination in every line of the stern, set features, now a trifle paler than usual.

"Mrs. Holt, I thought you were a fair-minded woman with a keen sense of justice, but I find I've been utterly

mistaken!"

"Mr. Fortescue!" she exclaimed faintly, colouring hotly under the direct glance from the grey eyes fastened on her face.

"I mean it," he said quietly, as she paused in her progress across the room, one hand upraised to her breast in an endeavour to still, by the pressure, the sudden leaping of "Please tell me why you've been avoiding her heart. me all day "-in a manner not to be denied.

Marion bit her lip. She had not expected such a direct attack as this, and was caught unprepared, not knowing

what to say.

"I-I hardly think you can accuse me of avoiding you"

-with some agitation turning away her head. "I met

you at lunch, and again at tea---"

"But your attitude is one of deliberate avoidance. You neither looked nor spoke to me if you could get out of it. You can't deny it—honestly you can't." His voice changed. "Simply because one of my men insults you you throw the blame upon me. At least, you might allow me to utter a word or two of apology that you should have been so treated on my land."

Marion turned, hardly recognising in this courteous, dignified host their old pal with his breezy style and drawling twang, and her tone altered to meet his

instinctively.

"I am exceedingly sorry if my attitude deceived you, Mr. Fortescue," she said quietly. "I in no way visited my displeasure on you for the incident of this morning. It was not your fault; and I should be a peculiar woman indeed if I became angry with you on that account."

Fortescue's face lightened visibly, but he was still

unsatisfied.

"Well, then, if I was not to blame, why treat me in that fashion?" he persisted, lapsing into his usual manner, and moving nearer.

"What fashion?" she fenced weakly. "You are really

absurd.

Unable to escape, she sank into a chair by the window, half-turned away from him, her fingers restlessly plucking at the fringes of the cushion beside her.

Fortescue quickly took advantage of the long couch

near by, and flung himself into it.

"I'm not absurd—nor imaginative! Come, now, confess you haven't wanted to see or speak to me since this morning."

"I suppose I haven't." The words were reluctant, but she answered his appeal as honestly as she could, trying to make the reply more gentle by adding: "I—I felt irritated and upset. I didn't want to see anyone!"

"Why couldn't you own up at once?" he asked, with that glimmering smile, making his whole personality irresistible. He had changed into a dark lounge-suit, faultlessly cut, and, with his fine figure and handsome face, was the type of man one would only meet once in a thousand. Perhaps Marion thought so as she glanced up. Her eyes lingered a long moment on the low, broad brow, the sweep of black hair above it—a yearning look, wrenched away with an effort, mercifully hid in the dim light.

"You won't feel irritated that way again," he told her.

"I discharged Brandon directly I heard."

"I know; Bob said you had."

Fortescue raised his eyebrows, the smile gone in a moment.

"Oh! Then you weren't too upset to see and speak

to Bob!" he remarked drily.

A vivid flush stained the pale cheeks, and she looked up with such a guilty start that Fortescue waited for no answer, but put in swiftly:

"Then it was me that you wished to avoid!"

"Mr. Fortescue, will you please change the subject? I have told you I don't blame you in the least, and I'm very sorry if I seemed to. Please let the matter drop."

But that was not his intention by any means. He leaned

towards her, insistent, immovable.

"You're keeping something back," he laughed. "I'll bet my best riding-boots you're annoyed with me in your heart." He paused a moment in reflection, watching, as well as he could, every line of the expressive face before him. "Why didn't you report the fellow before?"

"I—I didn't want him to lose his job—"
"You think I've treated him too severely?"

"Oh, no—only—"
"You wish I hadn't!"
Thrown off her guard:

"Yes, because he said he'd——" And then, remembering, she stopped abruptly, with a half-alarmed look in his direction.

Fortescue caught at the words instantly.

"He said—what did he say? I'd like to hear it."
Marion made no reply, only sat nervously twisting her

fingers in and out of the fringes of the cushion.

"Did he threaten you in any way if you reported him?"

"Y-es---"

"Only you?"

"Please, Mr. Fortescue! What does it matter?"

"It matters a lot to me. Did he threaten someone else?"

With sudden courage she lifted her eyes, meeting his

gaze full and straight.

"I should have controlled myself to-day, as I have done before, if he had only threatened me," she said simply. "It was when he spoke of injuring you who have been so kind to us that I lost my temper and struck him across the face."

Fortescue sat quite still for a moment, eyes turned away, lips a little stern and set. He had been hoping for this, had been leading up to it, but her way of saying it gave him no opening, only left him doubtful and disappointed. He would have given anything he possessed to know the depths of her anxiety on his account, but he could gather nothing from such frank words and clear glances. He sighed inwardly at his own failure.

"Guess it would be as well if you tell me what threats he used," he said dully. "We shall then be prepared if

he tries any tricks."

He saw the quick rise and fall of her breast under the thin gown, the look of mingled distaste and embarrassment. Quite suddenly she sprang up as if she would run from the room, but in an instant he had caught her by the wrist, detaining her by the touch of his strong fingers, drawing her steadily back to her seat.

"Why are you afraid of me to-day?" he said quietly. "There is something behind this, I know—and I mean to

hear it! What did he threaten to do?"

"Nothing! That is, nothing violent; he really only tried to be insulting—"

"Insulting?" he queried slowly. "In what way?"

A long, long silence. He wondered what she was thinking as she sat there, what it was that made her look so torn, so undecided, so obviously at conflict with her inner self. He was hardly prepared for the halting reply when it came,

"I—I would rather not repeat the actual words, Mr. Fortescue. I think you might guess how he would try to injure your reputation and mine. I—I thought things were different here—so fresh, so pure—so clean! But it seems even in this delightful place there are scandalous, lying tongues that would convert an innocent friendship into a shameless intrigue."

She could not see the expression of his face now, for the dusk had deepened and he sat a little back in the shadows, perfectly still like a figure carven in stone. Only one thing she could discern—the strong, bronzed hand clenched

upon his knee, the knuckles gleaming white.

John Fortescue, the man who had always prided himself on his straight dealing, his honesty, was suffering at that moment the severest shock of disillusionment and horror he had ever known. In his self-absorption he had never paused to consider what construction others might put upon his actions, the trouble that might arise through his

constant companionship with this woman.

In his cleanness of heart he had long since acknowledged his devotion, but he had never dreamt of seeking any reward at her hands. He was her husband's friend, a friend of long standing—that in itself was sufficient to keep his passion in check, and added to it was the realisation of her own purity and absolute loyalty to Gerald. He had never asked for more than a full measure of her friend-ship, had been content to spend a few short hours each day by her side hoping for nothing but a kindly glance, a few sweet words to treasure in his memory long after she was gone, giving himself wholly to her service in the desire to make these months the happiest she had ever known.

A pleasant dream, with a bitter awakening, as he learnt that he had been misunderstood—by how many? Only Brandon? Or were the rest of the boys, the townsfolk, Gerald—no, no, impossible!—and yet, if Bob—— Was he guilty? If not in intention, was he not in heart to blame? Had he not been ready to grasp every opportunity, make the most of each word and look that she had given him? What meant this cross-questioning—this probing

into her mind? Was it not actuated by the longing to

read her inmost thoughts in the hope-

Goaded beyond endurance by the sudden revelation of his own weakness, he sprang up and paced the room, once, twice, coming to a halt by Marion's chair, looking down at her.

"Mrs. Holt, I never guessed at such a thing. It seems incredible that anyone should dare to breathe such a suggestion to you. Surely you do not believe there is any truth in the vile insinuation? You must hold me guiltless; I could not endure that you should lose your trust in me. I have never wronged you or Gerald knowingly——"

She had risen at his approach, with one hand fluttering to her breast, eyes wide and dark, as if with some hidden

pain

"I almost wish I had not told you. I would not have done so, only I thought it would come a bigger shock if you heard it spread about the town." Her lips twisted into a mockery of a smile. "We—we must be more careful in future——"

"Careful?" he echoed it sharply. "You mean—"Something in the tone drove her back a little, with a

gesture that seemed to ward him off.

"I mean we must not be so careless of conventions," she stammered hurriedly, her breath coming unevenly. "We have spent rather a lot of time together, haven't we?"

Ominous silence before that low, hoarse question rang through the quiet room with startling emphasis.

"You mean I'm not to be with you so much?"

"I—I think it would be best if you—if you—I mean——"

He had grasped her by the shoulders, suddenly, holding her in his iron grip as easily as a child, and even in the dim light she could see above her the set jaw and blazing eyes. He had kept control of himself until now, but the thought of losing those precious moments was too much. For an instant he lost his head, and the pent-up emotion rushed out in a torrent of passionate words, one great cry that

would not be stilled.

"I can't do without you! You must know what it means to me—what you've meant to me since you came! I've tried to keep it from you, but you force me to speak when you say I must not be with you! Did he tell you that I love you? God! you don't know how much! I would sell my——"

"Mr. Fortescue—I implore you——"

It would not have stayed him. There came another voice from the doorway, expressionless, but infinitely more arresting than her terrified whisper.

"Ah Wing thinkee room velly dark—thinkee boss soon

likee lamp.'

A little scraping sound, followed by a soft glow of light, revealing the Chinee, inscrutable and calm as ever, moving gently towards the standard lamp in the corner, a bundle of tapers held in his hand, and one already lit in the other.

At the first spoken word in the strange voice Fortescue's hands dropped, as if paralysed, from Marion's shoulders. He swung round and stumbled to the windows, staring out into the gathering darkness with unseeing eyes, effectually brought back to earth and sanity by the

unexpected interruption.

What must she think of him? How she must despise him! Despairingly he told himself that she must consider him now on a level with Brandon; for what was there to choose between them? He had insulted her even as the other man had, taking advantage of her husband's absence to utter words he would never dare to speak in his presence. He despised himself, stood there full of disgust and condemnation and hot with shame, remembering how he had held her against her will, forcing her to listen to an avowal of love he had no right to make. If Ah Wing had not come in at that moment God knows what lengths he might have gone to—forgotten himself to the extent of taking her into his arms, perhaps even—

He forced the thought back. Only to imagine his lips on hers was sufficient to send the mad blood hammering to his head, his pulses leaping. He must try and steady himself enough to say something that would re-establish himself in her eyes, fight down this passion that threatened to master him even now.

He turned at last.

"Mrs. Holt, will you allow me to—to—"

It was not easy. The words would not come. He stood there dumb, a world of pleading in his face, a face that bore the marks of the struggle through which he was passing.

She would not look at him. Quickly, as if to prevent

him saying more, she said:

"Don't-don't go back to it!"

"I must," he told her passionately. "I must know

if you forgive-if you can ever forgive me!"

Slowly, like one compelled, she raised her head. What was it he read in that look, behind the pain? Nay, he could not fathom it. Drowned in a sense of his own despicableness and sure of her anger, how could he understand a look of wild exultation, of mad, pulsating gladness? It was covered so swiftly, before he had time to grasp its significance.

"It—it is not a question of—forgiving," she said strangely. A spasm of something wholly bitter and despairing crossed her face and both hands went up to her forehead—a slight gesture that betrayed the depths of her bewilderment. "I—I think it is for both of us to

-forget!"

She was gone, and from where he stood he could hear the sound of her light feet crossing the square passage, the opening of her door, and in the grating of the key in the lock as she fastened it he read her meaning, her unalterable decision—knew that the sweetness had gone out of his life.

CHAPTER XIII

It was nearly midnight when Ah Wing awoke, disturbed in his slumbers by a vague sense of something moving close at hand, a sort of muffled but regular tramp, tramp—the sound, faint and dull, but unmistakable, of someone walking, or rather pacing to and fro, not slowly—with quick, impatient strides that would have rung out sharply in the quietude of the house had not the walls been thick, deadening the echoes.

Ah Wing sat perfectly motionless, staring through the darkness. No need to wonder where those sounds were coming from. He knew quite well that they came from the next room to his, Fortescue's room, but, though he understood, his immobile face revealed nothing of his thoughts, only a certain taut intentness in the way he crouched there on the little bed betrayed his

interest.

So for a while he remained, then quite suddenly, not impulsively, but with almost dignified stiffness, he swung his legs off the bed, and, padding softly, made his way to the opposite wall and put his ear against it. Yes, it was as he guessed—the boss, awake and restless.

It was not the first time Ah Wing had heard those strange noises in the stillness of the night. It seemed to him he had stood thus listening more times of late than he could remember, listening and wondering, only returning to his

bed when deep silence reigned again.

To-night some instinct urged him farther than the wall, for after a moment or two he opened the door very gently and passed out into the square hall, the cream-washed walls of which shone ghastly pale in the moonlight.

Outside Fortescue's room he paused irresolute, thinking with face inscrutable as ever, then suddenly he knelt on the straw-coloured matting, head pressed close against the wood, straining his ears. What was it he heard?

The footsteps continuing for a while, hurriedly, restlessly,

the footsteps of one too highly strung, too tortured in mind to sleep-a pause-a low groan that made the listener start and shrink away—a thud, as if the weary pacer had flung himself down upon the bed, worn out-a name repeated over and over again, despairingly, passionately, hopelessly-oh, Marion! Marion! Marion!

Ah Wing rose noiselessly to his feet, staring at the closed

door with expressionless face for a long moment.

Then, swift as a flash, the look changed. The almond eyes narrowed to pin-points, the lips curled upward in a twisted, horrible grin-the whole face changed from immobility to devilish hate for a fraction of a minute.

"Missie Holt," he snarled under his breath, and then again: "Missie Holt"—and spat viciously upon the floor.

The midnight wandering on the part of Ah Wing was the beginning of a subtle but definite change in his attitude towards Marion Holt.

For a time she seemed unaware of the alteration. Truth to tell, her thoughts were wholly taken up with the difficulty of the situation as regards their host, but at last it began to dawn upon her, through the instinct of a woman used to little attentions, that the Chinee was not so devoted

to her service as he had been previously.

At first she thought it merely carelessness. Several mornings, for example, there were no flowers on the tray that held her morning cup of tea, for which she laughingly scolded him, saying that he had "one velly bad memly" —a plea he always put forward if he forgot an order. But she soon found that his memory continued to be "velly bad," and the flowers remained unpicked in the garden.

Again, he no longer ran to meet her when she returned from her morning ride with lumps of sugar for Silver Star, and if she asked him to run an errand he would find some excuse for not going, usually: "Ah Wing velly solly, velly

muchee work, velly beesy."

She had lately taken to do quite a lot of cooking, trying her skill at making new kinds of cake for tea or some appetising confection for dinner, but when she entered the kitchen now there were no lilting words and quick eager smiles to greet her and willing hands to fetch and carry. Mute and still the boy stood, with a curiously watchful glance that followed every movement she made.

Marion was intelligent enough soon to distinguish that he was not merely careless but acting deliberately, and unable to account for such patent hostility, and feeling grieved at losing his affection, she carried her troubles to Fortescue, who, however, made light of it.

"Ah Wing dislike you?" he exclaimed, laughing incredulously. "Why, he'd cheerfully lie down and allow

you to walk over him."

Marion shook her head, unconvinced. They were sitting at supper, not long returned from a dance at Costello's saloon, the fourth they had been to during their stay.

It had not been such a success, or, rather, not so enjoyable as the previous ones. A rough element had crept into the hall, a faster set had flooded the place, and, though Gerald appeared to have spent a pleasurable evening, Marion and Fortescue had both felt somewhat disgusted with the reckless spirit displayed, the loose talk, and almost indecent behaviour of many who were present, and agreed that dances down town in future were out of the question.

The three had been arguing the matter all through supper-time, Gerald openly scoffing at what he termed Fortescue's old-fashioned ideas and Marion's prudishness, and the two men had been so near a quarrel that Marion, in a panic, had hastily changed the subject by dragging in Ah Wing's name and her bewilderment over his attitude.

"What makes you think he has altered?" Fortescue

asked, at the doubtful shake of the head.

Marion looked across at him, and as swiftly away again. Gone were the frank, open glances, the free, friendly intercourse. She could never look at him without seeing that mask of quiet composure torn aside as it had been torn aside that night, revealing the inner man, passionate, pleading, shaking with emotion; never pass him but she must feel the touch of his hands upon her shoulders.

Yet not once since had he overstepped the borders, and so controlled, so natural was his manner, any woman might imagine the rebuff had cooled his ardour, successfully checking the growth of love before it had time to take firm root. Only a woman knowing him as this one did could read deeper and realise that beneath the surface stillness burned the raging fire of an unrequited passion—passion resolutely hid, held fast in the iron grip of a strong man who had no desire for sensual satisfaction at the cost of three persons' honour.

Knowing all this, how hard to face him now at the table and carry on the conversation easily, lightly, as if nothing

had occurred to disturb the peaceful atmosphere.

"I can hardly explain," she returned somewhat halt-

ingly. "I just feel he is different-"

"Woman's intuition?" he smiled back; and then, as Gerald laughed derisively: "Oh, I'm not one to sneer at instinct," he added, with a glint in the grey eyes betraying that he was a little ruffled in temper. "I think women can usually read pretty clearly. Anyway, it won't do any harm to tackle him on the subject."

He was as good as his word. When Ah Wing pattered in a few minutes later to remove the plates he leant forward across the table, giving the boy a steady, penetrating glance, speaking, however, in his usual cheerful manner. Any show of sternness would only turn the Chinese

obstinate, he knew.

"Ah Wing, Missee Holt tells me she is not velly pleased with you. What have you been up to, you young villain?"

Ah Wing stood still. Not a ripple of guilt shadowed his face—nothing could have been blander than his expression at that moment, nothing more innocent and serene than the look he gave his boss.

"Ah Wing allays do all Missie Holt askee. What Missie

Holt no likee?"

Here Fortescue was stumped. He turned for help to Marion.

"What do you complain of? Oh, see here! you neglect

to bring your usual floral offering in the morning---"

With his face a veritable blank, and in a tone of excessive politeness: "Ah Wing velly solly missee no pleased. He only poor China boy, not velly muchee used to white

ladies. Maybe he thinkee they too kind to like pletty little flowers pickee so—grow velly muchee nicee outside no die so queek!"

"You eel! Well, what about Silver Star? Hasn't

had any sugar for months-"

"Maybe Ah Wing thinkee Missie Holt love him too

muchee-no likee see him grow velly fat!"

Glad to see the smiles dawning on the sweet face opposite, a face grown more serious and saddened of late than he cared to see, Fortescue urged on the boy again, as the latter paused with a queer little deprecating gesture, his eyes twinkling with amusement.

"That doesn't account for everything. She says your looks don't suit—you've grown sour and disagreeable."

There again, Ah Wing velly solly his face no please—only poor China boy—allays had same face, same face as Ah Wing born with. He velly solly if it bad face; maybe he best do likee white ladies—

Amid a roar of laughter from his listeners, and in reply

to Fortescue's query as to what white ladies did:

"Makee velly beautiful"—with a lift of the shoulders and a sly, slanting look at Marion's face. "Dipee head in flour bag—rubee well in! Makee cheeks pink, so!—makee lips red, likee rose—velly nice! White ladies velly clever! Ah Wing do same—makee ugly face pletty like——"

But that was the end of Ah Wing. He disappeared under a rain of expostulations and laughter and anything else, such as cushions and slippers, that came handy.

Fortescue, still chuckling, turned to Marion.

"Say, didn't I tell you? Don't you fret about Ah Wing,

Mrs. Holt, he is quite harmless, believe me!"

He might have altered his opinion had he seen the blueclad figure crouching by the kitchen window, staring out into the darkness with eyes that held something brooding, something sinister in their liquid depths.

CHAPTER XIV

"I'M going down town," announced Fortescue one morning about a fortnight later. "Is there anything either

of you want?"

They had just risen from the breakfast-table. Silver Star having sprained an ankle, Marion was preparing to spend a quiet time on the verandah, and was at the moment busy selecting a book to read from the well-filled case, Gerald trying over a new song he had recently finished at the piano.

The latter looked up as Fortescue spoke, almost, it would seem, with a start of something very like alarm quickly

covered.

"Nothing for me, thanks," he said hastily. "I shall be going out myself in a few minutes—er—if it's not important business, Fortescue, perhaps you'd care to come for a stroll."

A flash of surprise crossed Fortescue's face. It was

long since Gerald had asked for his company.

"Sorry, old man—I'd like to, but I must see young Peters. Mrs. Holt, anything for you?"—as Marion

turned, book in hand.

"Oh," she said quickly, "will you be calling at Costello's? Don't make a special journey, but, if it's no trouble, please ask Dolly up to tea. She hasn't been for weeks; I can't understand it."

"Why bother your head about her if she chooses to stay away?" put in Gerald carelessly, or it might have been with assumed carelessness. There was something tense in his attitude as he sat there that seemed at variance with his indifferent speech.

"Perhaps she's not well," returned Marion. "I thought she looked very pale at the last dance, not like her usual self. Anyway, Mr. Fortescue won't mind taking the

message, will you?"

Naturally Fortescue, always ready to do her bidding, had no objection, and accordingly set off astride Marquis to do his errand. He had an appointment that morning with an architect, for he was starting a new project, namely, a club-house equipped with everything up to date in the sporting line for the boys as a home attraction in opposition to the many down town to which he had objection.

The scheme had created something of a stir. The boys were, of course, highly jubilant—more so when they found their friends would be made welcome also—Marion keenly enthusiastic, and the townsfolk more than a little amazed at John Fortescue's philanthropic outburst, save the few who would lose a certain amount of business over it. Only Gerald, again conscious of that gnawing jealousy at his friend's generosity and high purpose, betrayed no interest in the proceedings, except to utter a few sarcastic remarks relative to those people who had so much money they hardly knew what to do with it.

Though practically recovered from his illness, Gerald still displayed the same irritable, peevish manner, the old fits of ill-temper. Indeed, if anything, he was worse than formerly—moody, preoccupied, with the strained appearance of the man who has some weight on his

mind.

Marion, being used to his peculiar nature, paid little attention, but not so Fortescue. Keenly alive as always to every detail around him, he noted each careless word, each bitter look with amazement and hot disgust, only curbed by the thought that any interference from him would do no good and mar the rest of the stay for Marion.

It troubled him greatly. Even this morning, riding briskly down town, the remembrance of one or two things Gerald had said at breakfast was ever present with him, disturbing his peace, but a deep discussion on business lines at the architect's office succeeded in driving other anxieties out, and after a busy hour there he felt more cheerful and alert as he turned in the direction of Costello's saloon to deliver Marion's message.

It was crowded when he entered, and Dolly so busy serving behind the bar that she failed to observe him until he called her by name. She turned then with a start, blushing furiously.

"Mr. Fortescue!"

He laughed a little.

"Surprised to see me, I guess. Had to come down, so Mrs. Holt told me to bring you an invitation for tea. Getting quite worried as you haven't been up lately."

Dolly served another customer before she answered, and Fortescue, idly watching her, was struck, as Marion had

been, by the troubled aspect of the girl.

"I wanted to see you, Mr. Fortescue," she said, when she had a free moment. "I was coming up to the ranch this afternoon—at least, I was going to try, but I'm extra busy——" She broke off, looked undecided, and then, with the air of one forcing an unpleasant announcement: "I'm going away to-morrow."

"Going away?" Fortescue echoed in genuine surprise.

He never remembered Dolly going away before.

"Oh, not for long. I'm going to visit my aunt at Victoria. I'll be back in a week or two."

Surveying her pale cheeks and dark-ringed eyes, the man

said kindly:

"Glad to hear it, Miss Dolly; you look as if a holiday would do you good. Mind you come back with nice rosy

cheeks again!

She murmured something with lips that quivered a little; then, as if to hide her face a moment, while she conquered the sudden emotion, turned and obtained a drink, bringing it to him with a smile that she did her best to make natural.

"You wanted to see me, you said," Fortescue reminded her as he thanked her. "What can I do for you, Miss

Dolly?"

She looked at him with some curiosity. Fortescue had obviously altered lately. There was a new severity in his manner, and the fine-featured face was markedly thinner, the eyes drawn and tired. Still, as he spoke, the old Fortescue came back in the softened look, the flash of a smile.

"What's the trouble?" he said.

A fresh bunch of men had made their way to the bar.

Leaning forward as if afraid of being overheard, the girl replied in a hurried whisper:

"If you'll ride back a bit up the road, I'll overtake you. Too many here!"—with a significant glance at the crowd

jostling about them.

"Righto!" returned Fortescue easily, but his eyes narrowed thoughtfully. It must be something of rare importance to account for this air of secrecy, and wondered inwardly at the cause. He drank slowly to pass the time. Ignorant of her meaning, totally at a loss as to what was the matter, he yet took care to avoid any connection between her last words and his own departure by leaving in haste, the caution of a man reared in a place where the rustle of a leaf, the crackling of a twig, might mean a hidden enemy. Little interest he took in the men about him save if his eyes chanced to fall on an acquaintance, when he would give a brief nod, and they in turn left him alone. He had a way of showing by his attitude that he had no desire for a chat.

Having finished at last, he pulled out his pipe, loaded it carefully, and as he applied the match strolled leisurely towards the door to keep the appointment up the road.

He had almost reached it when, there being a lull in the conversation and noise, his keen ears caught that faint murmur from a corner of the room where four men sat playing cards at a small table, a faint comment, but startlingly distinct.

"There's the man I told you 'bout-what's carryin'

on with that vaudeville woman!"

Fortescue wheeled round like a man stabbed, and, thrusting aside those who stood in his way, strode heavily to the table, his glance seeming to fall by instinct on the sallow-faced, hollow-cheeked individual nearest him who had spoken.

"Would you mind repeating your remark?" he said,

pausing in front of him.

The tone was quite cool and steady, almost pleasant. The man, looking up in surprise on hearing it, unfortunately overlooked the ominous glint in the grey eyes that signified danger and got to his feet with an insolent swagger—for

he had drunk pretty deeply and was full of jaunty bravado. "Who is this little gentleman?" he asked, with a grin to those about him, for at the first word silence had fallen

on the crowded saloon.

"I think most folks here know me," returned Fortescue quietly, but with a deadliness of tone there was no mistaking. "You're sure an exception, or you wouldn't have thought it wise to pass that remark."

"What remark?"

A murmur rang through the room, and one of the fellow's pals pulled him nervously by the sleeve with a "Don't be a fool! Sit down and shut yer trap."

"Shut up yerself! Can't I ask the gentleman question? What remark was you referring to, m'lord?"

Again that faint murmur breathing caution to the reckless, swaying figure, foolishly ignored.

"You know right enough. If you want to display

your nerve, repeat it."

He was not drunk in the true sense of the word, but he

had had enough to make him pot-valiant.
"Sure! I'm long on nerve," he bragged. "I said you was the feller what's carrying on with that vaudeville woman from the other side. You got some taste, boy, she's a nice bit o'---'' He got no further. Out shot a muscular arm and an iron fist, and he went down with a crash, taking table, glasses, and bottles with him.

A shrill scream from Dolly and general commotion for a moment, but no man interfered. For all their wild ways these men had their code of honour, and very few had any sympathy with the fallen man. Also it was Fortescue, and the name carried weight in those parts. The recipient of the blow was only slightly dazed. He was up again in a second, his hand flying round to his hip, but, quick as he was, another beat him on time. As his fingers closed on the gun a shot rang out, and it dropped harmlessly to the ground as, with a howl of mingled rage and pain, he sank into a chair holding his shattered wrist. Fortescue, livid to the lips, but otherwise unruffled, looked steadily round at the mob of men.

"As you probably all know, the lady mentioned is my

guest. If anyone else would care to offer her an insult I

should be glad to meet him," he said clearly.

He waited a second, but there was no sound. It was as if everyone had ceased to breathe, and, slipping back his gun, with a slight contemptuous smile, he turned to leave.

He had barely gone two paces when a faint scuffle behind him, a sense of something moving conveyed a warning. He suddenly ducked, caught the fellow who was hurling himself in rage upon him on his broad back, and with a quick heave of his mighty shoulders flung him clean over his head across the bar, to fall, a distorted mass of humanity, under a pile of dislodged boxes, and smothered with broken glass.

The swiftness of the move, the agility and perfect ease with which he did it, sent up a spontaneous shout of

admiration from the watching men, and:

"Good for you, boss!" rang out a voice from the back of the crowd, as two or three rushed forward to raise the foolhardy gambler.

Fortescue glanced in that direction with a glimmer of a smile before he thrust the men away and stooped over

the unconscious form they had laid on a table.

With practised hands and keen eyes he examined the injured wrist, felt the bump on his head and all his limbs,

straightening up after a few minutes.

"He won't hurt," he said calmly. "Put him to bed and get the doctor—reckon he's about got enough to keep his tongue quiet for a day or two, anyway. If he hadn't been drunk I should have been more severe." A statement that caused a gasp. "Costello!"—to the landlord, now rushing in to ascertain the cause of the trouble—"send your bill for damages in to me."

And, quietly relighting his pipe, he strode briskly out

into the sunshine.

CHAPTER XV

THE unexpected upheaval at Costello's had done John Fortescue the world of good. For weeks he had been living in a ferment, a mass of highly strung nerves and keyed-up emotions, and the scrap gave him an excellent opportunity to give vent to the feeling that had been bottled up for so long, namely, to fight something or someone.

As he led Marquis up the road he was smiling a little despite his natural indignation at the cause of the quarrel. He knew, for one thing, that the same trouble would not occur again, and, for another, he was very thankful to think he had been the one to overhear the remark. It

might have been Gerald-with dire results.

It was not more than a minute or two before Dolly joined him, somewhat breathless and excited from the commotion and her haste to reach him.

"Oh, Mr. Fortescue," she burst out as she ran up, "I

sure thought you'd be killed!"

Fortescue glanced with amusement at her flushed cheeks and tumbled curls. The suggestion tickled him considerably, setting his eyes twinkling with much of their old, sparkling fun.

"Thought you'd have known better than that, Miss Dolly," he said lightly. "Reckon I'd take a lot of killing—I'm pretty tough. But you don't give strangers much

encouragement to visit your saloon, I must say."

Dolly laughed; then was instantly grave again, her

face troubled and perplexed.

"It's all that Brandon's fault, Mr. Fortescue; they were some of his pals in that corner. I saw him talking to them a day or two ago."

Fortescue raised his head sharply.

"So he's still knocking around! I thought he'd be

drifting off before this. I warned him-

"He's somewhere in the neighbourhood, anyway. He comes in most days, but he takes no notice of me. That's what I wanted to see you about."

"What? That he doesn't speak to you?" teased the man, laughing.

"Oh, you know I didn't mean that. I hate him!"

Fortescue looked at her with deepening amusement. She was such a child, a pretty child, not to be taken too seriously.

"Poor chap!" he exclaimed, with mock pity. "Well,

what was it then?"

Dolly raised eyes that had grown very serious to his.

"I think he's up to mischief," she said briefly, but with such a shrewd air that Fortescue was impressed despite himself. The smile died away, giving place to a slight frown.

"What makes you say that?" he asked abruptly. Dolly leaned nearer, dropping her voice to a lower tone.

"I reckon it's a bad sign when a man like Brandon

chums up with that Chink of yours!"
"With Ah Wing?" There was genuine astonishment in the exclamation. "Are you sure? Why, he never comes down town, or very seldom."

"So you think. Did Dolly pursed her lips knowingly. you know he was here Monday, and again yesterday?"

"I sure did not!" returned Fortescue emphatically. "He had nothing to come for. And you say he's friendly

with Brandon? Dolly nodded.

"I'll tell you how it was," she said quickly. happened to be in the bar on Monday when Brandon came in and asked for a drink as usual. He hadn't been sitting there long when yellow-face opened the door, looking about as if he expected to see someone. Brandon spotted him at once, and called out something none too polite you can guess, and the Chink crossed over to the table to answer him. I hung about thinking there'd be a row, but after a word or two they got quite pally, and sat whispering in the corner for a long time. It seemed a funny go to me, but nothing happened, so I thought no more about it. Then yesterday I was out shopping when who should I see but Brandon standing outside one of those filthy little Chinese shops in Main Street. I didn't quite know what to do, but I guessed he was up to no good and meant to see what it was, so I hid in a doorway and watched. I

nearly got sick of waiting. Presently out comes Ah Wing just as I expected, and walked up to Brandon. They talked for a bit, and then suddenly yellow-mug put something in Brandon's hand—a little packet—white—just like a packet of powder-

Fortescue started so violently that Dolly paused, half

scared.

"Why do you look like that?" she demanded. "Nothing," said Fortescue tersely. "Go on." With a curious glance, the girl continued rapidly.

"Brandon opened the paper, looked at it, with a grin, and then gave it back, Ah Wing slipping it up his sleeve. They had to pass my doorway, and I heard Brandon say: 'When he's out of the way.' And Ah Wing said something about milk-"

"My God!"

In a flash Fortescue remembered it was Marion's habit to drink a glass of milk about the middle of the morning, and this fact, coupled with the knowledge of Brandon's hatred and Ah Wing's strange animosity of late, made the scene Dolly had witnessed quite clear. There was not the slightest doubt that Ah Wing, for some fancied wrong, was conspiring with Brandon for revenge on Marion, revenge in the shape of poison, one of those subtle, deadly poisons such as only Chinamen know of, to be adminstered when he, Fortescue, was safely out of the way, in-

Then, swiftly following on his deductions, that horrible thought turning his blood to ice—that was vesterday! And this morning Marion was left alone in the house with Ah Wing-Ah Wing, only waiting his opportunity! He could hear Gerald saying: "I shall be going out myself in a few minutes." Why, by this time—

He reeled back, hand upraised before his eyes in an endeavour to shut out the awful vision. By this timeby this time-

"Mr. Fortescue! Mr. Fortescue!"

The terrified cry from Dolly recalled him. He dropped his hand, silencing her frightened questionings with a look.

"You're a dear child, Dolly; I'll never forget how much I owe you; you understand I must rush now. I hope——"

He could not for his life complete that sentence—the doubt of being in time was too much to dwell on. He sprang into the saddle, giving a last word over his shoulder to the girl whose instinct might mean the saving of a life.

"Don't breathe a word of this to anyone; I'll deal with it."

He was gone before she could barely nod, riding as he very rarely rode, with no thought of the animal under him, lashing at it with his hat, digging his heels fiercely into its sides as he urged it to the utmost. Much as he prized Marquis he would have had the last ounce of breath in its body that morning.

Dolly watched anxiously until horse and rider were well out of sight, then, with a sudden sob, covered her face with her hands, the tears falling fast now that there were none

to see.

"God, make it all right! Let him be in time! I tried to help—You know I tried to do something. Perhaps—perhaps it'll make up a bit."

That short journey, twenty minutes' furious riding, from the town to the ranch seemed like eternity to John Fortescue, with those horrible thoughts surging through his brain, but at last the house was in sight, and, slackening speed a little to avoid suspicion, he cantered up the road, dismounting, while the horse was still running, at the garden gate.

Then his heart got a nasty jolt as he swung round, for on the verandah outside the sitting-room windows sat Marion, delightfully cool and fresh-looking in white linen, her hat lying on the ground beside her and with a book on her knee, while in front of her, silent and morose, stood Ah Wing, tray in hand, on which stood a dish of biscuits

and a glass of delicious, foamy milk.

As Fortescue threw open the gate, to his unspeakable horror she leant forward with a smile of thanks, lifted the glass, and put it eagerly to her lips.

Almost paralysed with fear, the man could only get out

one word as he strode up the path:

[&]quot; Marion!"

The unexpected shout, the sound of her name, made her look up, and the glass, to his infinite relief, was lowered at the same time. She sat waiting, her face expressive of surprise and enquiry as she marked his haste to reach them. In less than a second he was there, breathing heavily, but calm and alert now that he knew he was in time.

Ignoring Ah Wing, he threw aside his hat, and, stooping

down, took the glass from her resistless fingers.

"Just what I could do with!" he laughed. don't mind? It's so hot riding—"

Marion rose unsteadily, her eyes fixed on his face. There was something written there that told her this was no ordinary request, no light matter. Though he smiled he was grey to the lips, the outstretched hand shaking visibly, steadying again as he lifted the glass.

"Good luck!" he said cheerfully.

A frightful scream rang out—and the glass was struck from his mouth, spilling the creamy milk down the front of his shirt, splashing Marion's light dress—a horrible cry, followed by silence, deathlike silence, as the three looked at each other, Marion very pale and startled, Fortescue tight-lipped and stern, Ah Wing obviously caught, and knowing it, as he looked furtively out of the corners of his

eves at the boss.

Fortescue had banked everything, even his life, on the knowledge of Ah Wing's devotion to himself. Almost at his wit's end as to how to deal with the situation, he had realised while walking up the garden-path that to accuse the boy openly would probably only result in a succession of lies and protestations of innocence. Nor would it mean the abandonment of the scheme. He knew if he could not prove the charge he would have to fight deeper cunning and duplicity in the future. He could not be sure the poison was in the milk. He believed it to be, but it would be difficult to detect. If it was not, to accuse meant simply to arouse suspicion.

He took the shorter way out, trusting to frighten Ah Wing into an expression of guilt-and he had won! The Chink had been ready to poison Marion without a qualm, but his courage failed when he saw the glass at Fortescue's lips, and he had, in a moment of panic, struck it away to realise instantly that he had betrayed himself.

Marion was the first to speak.

"What-what does it all mean, Mr. Fortescue?" she asked breathlessly, conscious that her limbs were trembling under her. "Ah Wing"-turning to the boy, as Fortescue made no reply-" what were you trying to do?"

Ah Wing looked up impassively. He expected nothing short of death for his attempted crime, and was waiting

quite resigned, hands buried in his sleeves.

"Boss-he knows!" he said briefly

Meeting Marion's eyes, Fortescue tried to make the least

of the answer without creating undue alarm.

"Ah Wing tried to make you ill by putting something in your milk, Mrs. Holt. Someone "-he knew better than to breathe the informer's name before the silent listener, "someone warned me about it this morning." He surveyed the boy with some curiosity. "What have you against Mrs. Holt, Ah Wing?"

No answer to that. Fortescue frowned heavily as he noted the obstinate face. He was greatly tempted to take a whip to the culprit, but Marion's presence stayed him.

"Reckon the sheriff will know how to loosen your tongue," he said drily. "Suppose Brandon told you it would never be found out when he put you up to it, eh?"

"Brandon!" Marion exclaimed.

"Yep, Brandon-he's the instigator-thinks you're responsible for his dismissal, I guess. I'm sorry I treated your remarks about this chap so lightly; you were right, apparently, though what he has against you I can't savvy. You've always treated him well-"

Marion, suddenly recalling Bob Walton and his strange attitude a little while back, with a woman's keen intuition,

was putting two and two together.

"Let me ask him," she said quietly. "You leave us a

moment; I believe he will tell me if you go away."
"What? Leave you with him?" cried F
astounded. "When he's just tried to——" cried Fortescue,

He checked himself at the ugly word he was about to use, but he knew instantly that she had guessed it.

"I know! I'm not afraid. Please let me speak to

him alone."

Satisfied by her composed face that she had no fear of the boy, he ran his hands over him as a precaution against hidden weapons. Finding none, he moved away a few paces, gun held between his fingers in readiness for any tricks, leaving Marion to put her questions, which she did as soon as he was out of hearing.

"Ah Wing," she said quietly, "why did you try to kill me?"

The boy glanced up. The blank expression assumed before the boss had vanished. There was scorn and

bitterness now in the black eyes as they met hers.

"Ah Wing hate you!" he answered, with a little snarl, lowering his gaze immediately, as if that was ample explanation and finished the matter as far as he was concerned.

"Why do you? What has changed you? You did

not always dislike me, Ah Wing."

"Ah Wing hate you now "-ignoring the question with Oriental cunning and steeling his heart against the soft, pleading voice.

But Marion was not to be put off so easily.
"You must have a reason," she persisted, and sat down to wait patiently while he thought it over. After a moment:

"You bring velly bad luck," he informed her.
She broke instantly into such a perfectly natural laugh that he raised his eyes to look at her, full of vague distrust and unconcealed dislike.

"What nonsense!" she exclaimed, still smiling. "Isn't everything just the same as before I came? Mr. Fortescue says it has been a very good year all round."

"Plenty corn-plenty money-velly bad year other

way," was the unmoved reply.

With the smile lingering about her lips:

"What other way?" she asked, gazing into his stony face. His eyes left her, wandered significantly along the verandah to where Fortescue stood with his broad back towards them.

[&]quot;Velly bad year other way," he repeated.

Marion could not fail to grasp his meaning, and a wave of hot colour flooded her cheeks, until now pale with her recent fright.

"Oh," she cried, with a startled gasp, covering the

tell-tale blushes with her hands.

"You makee boss velly unhappy!" said Ah Wing, as if in answer.

It was a moment or two before she looked up again. The smile had quite gone, leaving her very white, very drawn. The simple words had dealt her a heavy blow—"unhappy," "velly unhappy." Must she be for ever constantly reminded of the misery she had brought?

"What have I done, Ah Wing?"

He shrugged his shoulders, but his quick ears had caught the note of despair, and, despite his hatred, the glance resting on her face softened a little.

"You smile—be velly nicee—makee boss love you velly much," he began, but she interrupted the explanation

with a hurried:

"Oh, hush! hush!" Laying her hands over her ears as if she would shut out the very sound of it. "You must not say such things, Ah Wing."

"Boss, he say, allays speakee no lies."

Her eyes fell before the indisputable knowledge in his.

Again she sat motionless, thinking. Then:

"If—if it were so," she said very low, avoiding his glance, "don't you think it would make him more unhappy if you hurt me in any way?"

Instantly the quick answer, showing how thoroughly

he had threshed the matter out in his mind.

"You die-he soon forget-be happy-find woman

with no 'usband.''

"Did Brandon tell you that? He told you a lie, Ah Wing. White man never forgets the woman he—he loves." The soft voice faltered suddenly over the last words. "He would grieve and get more miserable every day, and wish he could die so that he might be with her."

A look of doubt and perplexity flashed for the first time across the still face. That side of the picture had never

presented itself to him before.

"And he would hate you because you dared to hurt her!" He took a step nearer, menacingly.

"You tellee me lies!" he said viciously, but she never

moved or hesitated a second.

"No, the truth," she said, convincing him by her very quietness. "Brandon is a wicked man, and made a fool of you. He will escape, and you will get the punishment—then he will laugh at you! He knew you would probably be caught—everyone is, sooner or later, that does wrong. You will be sorry presently that you turned against those who were kind to you."

Trouble and gloom settled on his face, but he would not

show it in speech.

"Ah Wing no fear to die!" he told her proudly.

"Oh, you won't have to die," Marion replied slowly, watching him, and remembering something of his past history that Fortescue had told her. "I expect Mr.

Fortescue will send you back to San Francisco."

Now Ah Wing had no very pleasant recollections of that place, where as a boy he had been beaten and half starved by a brutal old father, and, as he listened, the gloom changed to horror and dismay. Marion saw it, and pressed home her advantage.

"You would never see the boss again; and in a week or two he would get a new boy he could trust, a new boy he

would treat as kindly as he has treated you."

Whatever he had tried to do, she could not blame him when she remembered his devotion, and felt herself cruel

as she taunted him with another boy's prospects.

"Mr. Fortescue would have to send you away; he would always be thinking you might be trying to do the same thing again. Of course, I might be able to persuade him——"

The dark eyes fixed on her face were eloquent with pleading, but he could not bring himself to frame the words. He was torn between hope and dislike of this woman, whom he knew quite well held his fate in her hands.

"How would you repay me if I asked him to let you

stay?"

A moment of hesitation, of rapid thought.

"Ah Wing no try to kill you any more," he said

graciously.

"I should think not!" cried Marion, half indignant, half amused at his condescension. "But you would like to, eh?"

No answer.

"If that is all you can promise I shall not ask him"—with a touch of finality.

"What Missie Holt want Ah Wing to say?"

Marion pondered. What had she better make him promise?

"Well, first of all, not to see Brandon again-"

"Ah Wing promise!"

"Or try to do him any harm for his share in this——"
After a moment's hesitation that showed he had contemplated some such idea he succumbed.

"Ah Wing promise that too!"

"Not to go to the town unless someone sends you."

"Ah Wing say he no go!"

Assured of his honesty, Marion rose from her chair then,

laying a hand on his blue sleeve.

"If you will try and keep your promises and be velly good boy like you used to be, I think Mr. Fortescue will forgive you presently, but you must try hard, and let him see that you mean me no harm. You don't hate me now, Ah Wing?"

No answer again, and Marion gazed at him in despair.

What could she say or do to win his affection?

"You don't hate me now?" she repeated insistently, compelling him to look at her.

"Ah Wing only serve woman who makee boss happy—

love boss velly much, like Ah Wing."

"Love boss velly much." The words fell from her lips in a faint whisper, the rich colour flooding her cheeks again as they stood eye to eye a moment, then:

"What—what cause have you to hate me, Ah Wing?"

she asked softly.

He drew back a little, searching the sweet face so near his own, incredulity and delight struggling to find expression, his mind dimly grasping her meaning. "You no tellee me lies?"

"No! no!" Her voice broke as her eyes followed his

along the verandah to where Fortescue stood.

"Ah Wing and Missie Holt should always be very good friends." She conquered the impulse to speak more openly, and, still retaining her hold on his arm, called to his boss. "Mr. Fortescue!"

He turned sharply, raising his eyebrows in surprise as he saw the intimate attitude—Ah Wing's apparent submission and Marion's friendly air. The latter did not leave him

long in doubt as to her intention.

"Mr. Fortescue, Ah Wing is very sorry. He understands how wrong he was to try and hurt me. He will never do such a thing again. Will you please overlook it and let him stay?"

"Overlook it?" Fortescue echoed blankly. Then he

strode forward, touching the boy on the shoulder.

"Get inside!" he said curtly, waiting, frowning, until the Chinee had disappeared after a glance of entreaty at Marion. "Sorry, Mrs. Holt"—he slipped the gun back, burying his hands in his pockets—"you ask the impossible; it's not safe to have him about the place. I shall pack him off by the afternoon train to Mr. Werner—he's wanting a boy. I would carry the matter further, but I think for your sake it would be wiser to let it drop."

"Yes—oh, yes—let it be kept quiet. I don't want the story spread about." Her voice dropped. "And please don't mention it to Gerald; it will do no good, and he—he wouldn't understand." She changed the subject hurriedly. "Please let Ah Wing stay. I told him I would persuade you if I could. He promises not to see Brandon again, or to go to the town unless specially sent. I am sure

you can trust him."

"No use." He shook his head, smiling, but his jaw was stern. "I know these beggars. If he's got a grudge against you he'll never rest until he has it out on you, and "—his voice deepened, as it always did when he was moved—"I can't risk it!"

For the first time Marion accepted the words in their true meaning, without a sign of embarrassment or reserve.

Her eyes lifted to his, quietly smiling through their sadness.

"I know," she said gently. "But indeed you need have no fear. He will not hurt me in any way. Let me decide,

please."

Fortescue could not tear his gaze from her, so sweet, so infinitely tender was the tone. He had never dared to hope, and yet, when she spoke thus, it would almost seem——

"You know I can't refuse you anything," he said roughly. "But you've no right to trade on it. Why do you want

him to stay so much?"

He never forgot that look, one that set his heart pounding

madly, the blood rushing to his head.

"He is so devoted to you! I—I would like to remember after—after I leave—that you have someone who loves you always by your side——"

" Marion ! "

He took a quick step nearer, breathing quickly, a dangerous light in the grey eyes, but she checked him instantly.

"No, no—you must not think—don't—don't say anything! We shall soon be going home, and—and we should

not like to remember----

"There seems no comfort, not even a word, for me," he said hoarsely. "I have asked so little, yet even a word is denied."

"I know! Asked so little, and given so much! If I could only tell you how deeply your love has touched me. But I cannot, you know that; I have no right to say it, or you to hear."

"Forgive me," he said, after a moment. "Sometimes—the pain—one longs for an instant's relief—but I was wrong. It is much to know that you understand and

think kindly of me despite my shortcomings---"

"Let that be your comfort. Let the thought of the happy hours we have spent together give you some solace. Remember always that I bless and thank you for every kindness, every consideration you have shown to both of us, and that these months beneath your roof have been the happiest of my life!"

CHAPTER XVI

THE building of the new club-house went on at a surprising pace once the plans were drawn up and the main details decided upon. The whole of the work was being done by the boys themselves in relays as they could be spared from their ordinary duties, and they went at it with a will, anxious to get the job finished and enjoy the fruits thereof.

Marion spent much of her time, during the next fortnight, up on the site, watching progress and making suggestions, all of which received due attention from Fortescue and the young architect, Mr. Peters. The building itself was by no means elaborate. It consisted of a large room, suitable for dances, boxing displays and the like, and two smaller ones—the first to be used for billiards and games, the second well fitted up as a reading-room. At the back there was a sensible kitchen, where refreshments could be easily and quickly prepared.

Fortescue was paying the piper, but, though generous, he was not foolishly lavish. He believed in the boys having a pecuniary interest in the affair, and each one was to pay a small yearly subscription towards the upkeep of the

establishment.

"I think the boys are working splendidly," said Marion one morning to Mr. Peters, as they stood talking together at some little distance. "They seem so keen to get it finished."

Mr. Peters laughed as he glanced at her. He was a great admirer of Marion Holt, whom he had met for the first time at a dance down town. He reflected as he looked at her, standing by Silver Star's side in her plain white silk shirt-blouse and neat riding-skirt, that you would hardly believe her to be the same woman as the one who had created something of a sensation at Costello's saloon; yet he had to admit that she was as equally attractive this morning as she had been then.

"There's a motive behind their haste," he replied, with a smile. "Mr. Fortescue wants it completed before you leave. You've another month, haven't you? Oh, five weeks!

That's better still. He wants you to declare it open and officiate as hostess. I believe there's to be a boxing match, a sociable dance, and a supper to finish on the first evening."

"How delightful! He thinks of everything, doesn't he?" Marion exclaimed, her face expressive of such pleasurable surprise that young Peters wished he had sufficient cash to start philanthropic schemes.

"Sure, he's a wonder," he agreed, with unstinting admiration. "No need to figure out why the boys worship

him. Here he comes."

Fortescue came up to them, laughingly showing his hands grimed with plaster and dust. His hair was ruffled and wind-blown, his face smudged, and his shirt undone, revealing the powerful chest and throat, but he looked happier and lighter hearted in his toil than he had done for many a day.

"Gee! These boys keep one going! I meant to take you for a ride this morning "-turning to Marion-" but it seems hopeless. They're two men short, and need my help. Dick Richards has hurt his foot, and Weston's gone

for the mail. You don't mind?"

"Of course not," returned Marion, stifling her disappointment. "I'll go for half an hour's run and come back later; I know you two want to talk."

"Bring Gerald along if you can," Fortescue called after her as she mounted and began to trot off. She turned in the saddle, looking back, and young Peters, chancing to glance up, discovered that rapt look on the face of the man beside him, and began to think.

"No use," she laughed; "he's waiting for his letters.

He won't let anyone disturb him until after lunch."

Sure enough, Gerald was waiting for the letters, pacing the garden and gazing up the road as if his very life depended on their arrival.

Having to wait longer than he expected, he was in no very good humour when Weston hove in sight with the bag, and took it from him with a curt:

What a devil of a time you've been!"

He was used to saying such things to his wife, who generally ignored them, but he was up against different

material now. Weston was as hot-tempered as he, and the snappish remark brought a quick retort.

"Why the hell didn't yer go yerself if you're so mighty

smart?"

Gerald stared at the man in haughty amazement. To address him in that tone! Preposterous!

"Do you know who you're speaking to?" he asked icily. "Sure, but I don't take my orders from you," Weston growled, adding, as Gerald opened his mouth: "Oh, cut

it out! I ain't takin' none o' that bluff."

Gerald looked at him again, at the massive frame and frowning face—and thought better of it. The crushing answer died away. In dignified silence he turned and marched into the house with his head in the air—an action

that brought a slow grin to the rancher's face.

Gerald was no great favourite with the boys. They were usually polite, knowing it would be unwise to be insolent to a friend of the boss, and on account of his ill-health they refrained from playing tricks with him, but he was not liked for all that, and every one of them would have welcomed an opportunity of having a bit of fun at his expense or giving him a good dressing-down.

Once in the sitting-room Gerald forgot all about Weston in the excitement of sorting the letters. The one he fastened upon with such nervous eagerness bore, strange to say, a Canadian postmark, though he had always maintained that Fortescue was the only friend or acquaintance he had in the Dominion. With shaking fingers he tore it open, scanning the writing, writing that was marred by many blots and smears, as if tears had fallen upon the pages.

It was evident the letter contained no good news, for as he read he staggered to his feet with face gone white as

death, his eyes staring wildly.

"It's a lie—it's a lie!" Like a trapped animal he glared round the room, hands clenched on the table to support himself. "A damned lie! I won't believe it; it's impossible! My God! I say it's impossible!"

But, though he raved, in his heart he knew well enough it was possible, and sank groaning into his chair, hiding his

distorted features with his hands.

He was so absorbed that the entrance of Ah Wing presently passed unheeded, until the boy, unable to account for the huddled-up figure, crossed the room and touched him on the shoulder. He started up then, the look of guilty fear fading almost instantly, as if the sight of the yellow face was preferable at that moment to any other.

"What do you want?" he said thickly, scanning the boy

furtively.

"Ah Wing thinkee Mister Holt feeling velly bad?"

"Yes, yes—very bad." He caught hurriedly at the suggestion, but it was nevertheless the truth. His face held now a curious pallor, the lips slightly blue, and he breathed short and fast, as if he had been running. "Get me some brandy."

It revived him after a few minutes, and he became more composed. Still, for a long time he sat at the table, resting his arms on it, staring before him with eyes that saw

nothing save the visions of his own imagining.

After a while he looked up with the air of one who had come to a decision, and spoke to the boy, who was still

hovering uncertainly in the background.

"Ah Wing, I'm going down town to the post-office—understand? If I'm not back to dinner you can tell the boss that. Don't tell Missie Holt I was queer though!" At the hint of doubt creeping into the boy's face: "Mustn't

worry Missie Holt, eh?

Oh, no. Ah Wing could be as silent as the grave if necessary—Gerald Holt knew that! He was not back at dinner-time. Fortescue and Marion were surprised, but not unduly so. It was not the first time he had been absent, and Ah Wing's explanation that he had gone to the post-office was feasible enough. Could they have seen him there, telephoning and telegraphing railway and shipping companies, they would not have felt so satisfied.

He put in an appearance later in the day, looking somewhat relieved, though the strain of the morning had left its mark upon him. Fortunately for him, his wife and Fortescue were too absorbed in their new interests to take much heed of him during the afternoon or they must have noticed his nervous, furtive manner. It was supper-time

before they had time to sit and chat together. Even then Marion appeared to see nothing amiss. Truth to tell, she was tired with the day's exertions, and at the earliest possible moment retired to her room to get a good night's rest, leaving the two men at the table. Fortescue was busy reading some of his mail, which had been neglected until now, but his senses were more acute than Marion's, and he had been aware for some time of the restless fidgeting on the part of the other man, and was not altogether unprepared when Gerald suddenly broke the silence.

"I say, old chap---"

Fortescue looked up instantly, with a smile, but it faded swiftly as he saw his friend's flushed face, with its halfshamed, half-reckless expression.

"What's the trouble?" he asked quickly, throwing

aside the letter he was holding.

Gerald, toying with a piece of bread, crumbling it into

little pieces, forced a laugh.

"Oh, nothing wrong," he said, trying to speak carelessly, and failing utterly in the attempt. "Just a change of plans. I expect you'll be surprised to hear I'm thinking of clearing out at the end of next week."

"Clearing out?" Fortescue repeated stupidly, entirely

failing to grasp Holt's meaning.

"Well, going back home, if you like that better,"

explained his friend, with a touch of impatience.

"Going—back—home! But you came for six months!"
Fortescue had paled visibly under the shock of the unexpected announcement and hardly knew what he was saying. Nothing had been further from his thoughts than this! It could not be true! He must be dreaming!

"Oh, I never fixed on a definite period myself. I always intended to return when I was fed up, and I'm thoroughly

fed up now!"

Fortescue sat back slowly in his chair, forcing himself to

speak naturally, evenly.

"I'm—I'm sorry you feel that way. I really hoped you'd be staying longer. I've tried to make things interesting and comfortable as far as I could. Of course I know it's quiet——"

"Darned quiet!" was the emphatic rejoinder. There was no courteous acknowledgment of the other man's generosity, no word of thanks for all he had done for them.

I shall be thankful to get back to civilisation!"

Fortescue felt the imputation keenly, but he tried not to show it save for a few quiet words that would not be stifled.

"Reckon we seem a lot of savages out here," he said.

Perhaps the tone was significant. Anyhow, Gerald had the grace to lower his eyes, and add, with a little more warmth than usual:

"It's been jolly good of you to have us, Fortescue. You must come over some day and let us have the pleasure of returning it. We'll show you a little of London then, my boy, and how to enjoy life."

Thanks," Fortescue said drily. Gerald's notions of enjoyment were very different to his. He sat silent for a time, trying to get used to this sudden change of events, wondering what he could do or say to persuade. He did not mean to lose them without a struggle.

"Of course that's not definite?" he asked, smiling. "Think it over, Gerald. Five weeks isn't a lifetime. I'd like you to be here for the harvest—and you're forgetting the club-house. The boys are working real hard to get it

finished before you go---"

Gerald drummed on the table before replying, and Fortescue made the mistake of thinking he was considering

the matter. He was speedily undeceived.

"As a matter of fact it is definite" -- defiantly. "I've booked our passage, and we are due to catch the 12.15

from here next Thursday."

Fortescue had the hardest struggle in the world to keep back the hot words that rushed to his lips. There was something so underhanded, so mean, in this method of doing things. Why could he not have been frank and open about it from the first, instead of sneaking away to do things behind their backs? He had to get up from the table on a pretext of finding his cigarettes to prevent himself from saying all he thought.

"Does Mrs. Holt know your new arrangements?" he

asked, after an awkward pause. He was almost sure she did not, and his brow contracted a little. What would she say to this? The disappointment, the parting from everything she had grown to love so dearly, would be more than she could bear, he knew.

Gerald glanced up in faint surprise.

"Marion? Oh, no; I haven't mentioned it yet. I

will, presently."

The indifferent attitude, the utter lack of regard for his wife's wishes, stung Fortescue deeply, but he had himself well in hand.

"Perhaps she would prefer to stay longer—I'm sure she would! You know how keen she is on this new project of mine. She will be horribly disappointed if you take her away right in the middle of it, Gerald. I'm sure she would wish to stay."

"Perhaps so," returned Gerald carelessly. "I've no doubt she'll make a devil of a fuss "—with a shrug of the shoulders plainly showing what little effect any fuss she

made would have on him.

It was too much. Fortescue hurled the lighted cigarette into the hearth and turned upon his friend, hands thrust

deep into his pockets.

"By God!" he said very low, but with such force that the other man sat upright in astonishment. "I think you're the biggest cad where your wife is concerned that I've ever had the misfortune to meet."

Gerald sprang to his feet, scarlet in the face with sudden

temper.

"What the devil do you mean, Fortescue?" he cried

hotly.

"You heard what I said! You're the biggest cad where your wife is concerned that I've ever had the misfortune to meet!"

Unable to believe his ears—"Are—are you trying to

pick a quarrel with me?"

"Quarrel!" Fortescue laughed, a laugh expressive of such cold contempt that the other man winced sharply. "You're not worth quarrelling with, Gerald; I feel more like putting you across my knee and giving you a good

spanking! When I quarrel I have it out with a man who has pluck enough to fight a man, not one who can only bully a woman!"

"I don't know what you mean——"

"Reckon you do right enough, so don't bluster! Frankly speaking, you haven't a thread of decency in your make-up where a woman's concerned—and that's putting it mild! It's not my habit to insult a guest, but, by Heaven! you go too far, and it's our way to say what we don't like free of charge. We don't take much stock in fancy manners, believe me! I've seen how you've treated your wife since you've been here, and I guess you were no better, probably worse, at home. You've not the slightest consideration or respect for her; and it's time someone took you in hand, old as you are. Not once during your stay have you asked her opinion, consulted her wishes, or tried to make her happy.

"You vent on her your irritable, peevish temper; you order her about as I wouldn't order a dog. You're no man—you're nothing but a spoilt, ill-mannered kid; and, if it hadn't been for your bad health, which you trade on, I'd have knocked it out of you before this. Perhaps it's a good thing you're going back to London; maybe there's some use for you there—there's none here! Your kind

don't flourish in these parts."

He checked himself with an effort, trying to remember that this man was Marion's husband; and Gerald, white and outraged, put in a word as he paused.

"I've never been spoken to like it in my life!" he cried indignantly, gripping the back of his chair with hands that

literally shook with inward passion.

"Reckon that's so," Fortescue agreed more quietly. "You're getting it now all together. You might have made something of yourself if you'd heard it before. Man!"—his voice deepened suddenly, arrestingly earnest—"don't you realise what a treasure you've got in that wife of yours? I tell you, some of us fellows in the lonely places of the earth would pretty near sell our souls for a woman like that. We've so few, we can't afford to treat 'em rough!"

"You're talking through your hat," Gerald informed

him rudely. "Marion has all she wants—if she's not happy it's her own fault."

He sank into his chair again, resuming his drumming

on the table.

"Everything save love, consideration, and sympathy," answered Fortescue very low; and then, after a moment or two: "Think of what she means to you, if only in your profession. What would you be without her? You ought to go down on your knees when you remember what you owe her—""

"Plenty of other women can sing."

"Rubbish! You know you owe best part of your popularity to her. You admitted it to me not long after you came out, so you need not try to deny it. She studies you in every way. Think of how she has led a life she detests, a life she is totally unsuited for, to please you and help you on——"

Gerald looked up, regarding his friend curiously. He had regained a little composure, and was paying attention to

what the other said, but he made no reply to it.

Fortescue, also calmer, adopted a pleasanter tone, one of quiet reasonableness.

"You seem so indifferent. Does it never strike you that your wife is a singularly attractive woman?"

"I shouldn't have married her otherwise---"

"I believe you," returned Fortescue drily. "You showed wisdom there, if not of the highest order, but I'm darned if you show any when you neglect her openly and other men are forced to fill a rôle you should occupy."

"Sorry to have troubled you"-loftily. "I forgot how

valuable your time is."

"Don't be a young ass! Honestly, though, Gerald, you're running a big risk, take it from me. It's quite within the bounds of possibility for another man to fall in love with her."

Gerald laughed shortly, curling a scornful lip.

"Let him, if he wants to," he said disagreeably. "He'd have pretty poor taste. I don't care for second-hand goods!"

It was said hastily, defiantly, without thought, but it cut Fortescue like a knife. He leant forward across the table,

his hand clenched as if he could knock the other backward.

"You skunk!" he said. "If you will have it, here's one that doesn't share your exquisite taste—I love your wife!"

Dead silence in the lamp-lit room. Gerald stared vacantly up at the speaker, unable to grasp the meaning of the words.

"You what?"

Fortescue was already regretting his hasty speech, but it was not his way to back out.

"I said, I love your wife," he repeated steadily, looking

squarely across the table at the other man.

"Good Lord!"

The blank tone, the bewildered gaze, would have been ludicrous under any other circumstances. Fortescue found nothing to smile at. It was an agony to him to face Marion's husband with those words on his lips, but behind his pain was the vague hope that the revelation would work some change in his friend's conduct; but, alas! he took

it as he took everything else-badly.

"Good God! What a damned fool I've been," he said slowly. "What endless opportunities I've been giving you to fool me. All these riding-lessons, and country walks, and new club-houses——"The insinuating manner was almost more than Fortescue could bear, but he was holding himself in a tight grip, and listened in silence as Gerald continued with rising passion. "Lucky thing we're going home before complications set in—the eternal triangle stunt, with the soft husband and Judas friend all complete! Nice thing for honest John Fortescue"—oh, the bitter stress laid on the words—"the straight guy, to find himself named as co-respondent——"

"Be silent!"

Gerald sprang up, almost weeping in his mad rage,

sending the chair back with a crash.

"You damned sneak! D'you think I care for your bullying? You're no better, for all your brag, than the rest of us! And that piece of proud virtue, that sweet, lily-white flower——"

"Be silent, I tell you-unless you want my fingers at

your throat!"

"Let him speak! Let him show what manner of man he is!" It was Marion's voice behind them, breaking in clearly. She had been ready for bed, but, hearing the raised voices, had come running in, and now stood in the doorway—Marion, with her hair unbound and rippling about her shoulders, clad only in a delicate primrose silk and lace négligée, her feet thrust into little satin slippers. And as her husband looked upon her as she stood there, her eyes blazing with angry scorn and her slim figure drawn to its full height, it came upon him in a rush of overwhelming conviction that it was Marion—Marion—Marion he loved—that the one woman in all the world he wanted was his own wife, his wife, who for years he had neglected and despised.

This was why he had found no satisfaction in his vices, no contentment in his pleasures; this was why he had striven, lied, to keep them hidden; this was why he had been in such terror and suspense all day; this the real reason behind that gnawing sense of jealousy against Fortescue—Fortescue, who had won her regard, her interest, her affection, as he had never been able to win it—and as he looked at him in his magnificent strength, his handsome appearance, the whole attractive personality of the man he had called his friend, the jealousy surged up into a whitehot flame of hatred so fierce that he lost complete control, and as Marion spoke flung out his hand in a mad gesture.

"Get back to bed!" he cried hoarsely. "Do you hear me? Get back to bed! I can deal with your cowboy lover!"

Fortescue started forward as the words fell in their fullest meaning from the other's lips, his hands upraised ready to choke them back, but instantly Marion was before him with a moaning cry.

"Not that-oh, not that!"

The sight of her clinging arms, her lifted face looking into Fortescue's stern, set features, added fuel to the flame, incensing him the more.

"Yes, your cowboy lover—you could be warm enough to him, I'll warrant, though you had nothing to spare for me!"

"You lie!" said Fortescue over Marion's bowed head.

"Your wife is as virtuous and pure as the day you came, you hound!"

"You expect me to believe it?" he sneered.

Marion flung round at that, with a laugh so terrible that

both men were struck dumb, awed into silence.

"Look at him!"—pointing at Gerald with an accusing finger. "Look at him, that creature who calls himself my husband, and who dares to question me! Ask him what his life has been for years! Ask him if he remembers Susie Belmore, the woman he consorted with less than three years after our marriage! Ask him if he remembers Lilian Garner, whom he left to walk the streets until his wife gave her a fresh start in Australia! Ask him if he remembers Pamela Cartwright? Ask him! Ask him what woman he held last in his arms! Ask him all this—and then how he dares to charge me with forgetting my honour?"

"Let me go!" It was Fortescue's voice breaking in, hoarse and strained. "It's not safe for me to stay in this

room----'

"Ask him who paid his gambling debts when he had run through all his money! Who he owes his very life to when he was lying at the gates of death——"

"Let me go-unless you want me to murder him before

your eyes!'

"Murder him!"

She laughed again in bitterest scorn, motioning towards her husband.

All the fight had gone out of Gerald now. He was cowering in his chair, vainly trying to shut out the sight of that merciless face, the sound of that scathing tongue, with his hands. If her words were a terrible revelation to Fortescue, how much more so to the miserable man who had thought her ignorant all these years.

"Murder him!" she repeated. "Look at him!—that

"Murder him!" she repeated. "Look at him!—that thing who can only repay fidelity with treachery, and generosity with insults! Would you soil your clean hands

with such as he?"

"You don't know all," said Fortescue heavily, his hand closing like a vice on her shoulder. "He means to take you back next week; he has planned it all without saying a word!"

"It is like him; but I'm glad, glad! Do you think I would stay another hour, another moment, under your

roof, if it could be avoided?"

"Unless you stayed for good! Marion, he has forfeited all right to your loyalty. I ask nothing but to protect you, care for you—you should never have cause to regret it——"

She stared at him dumbly.

"What-what do you mean?"

"Divorce him! You have good cause to-"

But as he spoke Gerald staggered up, to fall at her feet, his shaking hands seeking to clutch at hers.

"Marion-Marion!"

"Don't touch me!" She shrank back, lifting her hands out of his reach, but he caught at the flowing silk of her loose robe desperately, holding her, forcing her to listen.

"He wants to take you from me! Marion, you won't go, you won't leave me! I'll do anything—anything! Marion!"

Fortescue sickened at sight of the distracted figure, the haggard face, with its curious pallor and bloodshot eyes. He glanced up at the other face above it, so hopelessly worn and weary. He must stop this scene at any cost.

"Get up!" he said sternly. "Get up! Do you hear?

Pull yourself together, man!"

Gerald raised his head. Some subtle change, some strangeness in the look, made Fortescue suddenly bend forward, with a stifled exclamation.

The lips, faintly blue, moved once—twice—with the effort to speak; the next instant Fortescue lifted him, a

dead weight, in his strong arms.

The intolerable suspense, the shocks of the morning and evening, the over-exertion and fever-pitch of excitement to which he had worked himself, had been too much for the diseased body. Gerald Holtlay practically unconscious all night, passing rapidly from one swoon to another, so lasting that they thought he must surely die in one.

But it was not to be. The only living thing that perished during those terrible hours was the last flickering hope in John Fortescue's heart; for as he looked upon that beloved face, so divinely tender and pitiful again, bending over her husband's pillow, he knew that his cause was lost.

CHAPTER XVII

WITHIN a day or so Gerald was about again, apparently none the worse bodily, save for some slight weakness, for his sudden attack.

As far as temper was concerned, he was by turns humbly considerate or sullenly resentful, as the mood seized him. For Marion's sake Fortescue bore with him with ineffable patience, ignoring the bad and meeting the good with his usual frank courtesy, but there could never be any pretence

of friendship between them now.

Gerald, full of bitterness, the bitterness of the man who feels himself outrivalled, felt no regretful pang at the changed relationship, but Fortescue suffered keenly during that last week. He had been genuinely fond of Gerald, indulgent with his faults, full of admiration for his genius, thinking him more weak than sinful. It was a staggering blow to know him as he was, despicable, lustful, unclean. A thousand times he told himself he would rather, far rather, have mourned his death than have experienced such awful disillusionment, such cruel disappointment. It made the parting so much harder. To see her go back with a clean, honest man would have been bad enough, but to realise to the full the character of the one she must now return with, the one she must live in daily contact with, seemed more than he could bear.

Not once had any of them referred to that terrible night. What good could be served by dragging it to light again? No words could blot it out; no words could alter it. It was past and done. Let them turn their faces to the future

and what it held for all of them.

Marion had long since reckoned up the days and nights to their departure. Every morning on awakening she would say under her breath: "Only another six days!—only another five . . ." until the number dwindled steadily down to "one."

She had learnt from Fortescue of Dolly Costello's visit to her aunt at Victoria, and had felt hurt that the girl had gone without a word of farewell, but it was not in her nature to harbour resentment, and on the last day she wrote her a long letter, affectionate and kind, enclosing the string of jade Dolly had so much admired.

The last night came—the last night under Fortescue's

roof.

All went early to bed after a dreary evening in which they had made vain efforts at conversation and miserably failed. The piano stood in the corner, silent and neglected, for even Gerald lacked the nerve to touch the keys. Marion's books and needlework had disappeared, the table near the windows that had been littered with her husband's manuscript was completely cleared. Nothing remained to show they had made the room their home for the past five months.

Gerald, with unusual thoughtfulness, left his wife alone and was soon sleeping soundly. But not so Marion. The grey dawn found her lying motionless, but wide-awake, her eyes gazing through the open windows across the rolling plains as if fearful of losing the last sight of them.

At the first peep of the sun she rose quietly and dressed, smothering a sob as she slipped into her travelling-dress of

fawn cloth heavily embroidered in Oriental colours.

She could scarcely realise that this was indeed the last morning, that the possibility was she would never see this place—this place she had grown to love so well—again. The rugs and baggage ready strapped, the trunks labelled and addressed, seemed to mock at her as her eyes fell upon them, telling her of a destination not to be avoided, of fate that could not be overcome.

Gerald was still sleeping. Looking at him, she wondered bitterly how one with so much on his conscience could lay there peacefully, with untroubled brow, in calm

repose.

Crossing the room softly, she opened the door, standing for a moment in the square, cream-washed hall. The house was very silent, very still; she knew it could not be much later than six o'clock; and, with the sudden thought of ascertaining the exact time, she entered the sitting-room. Then her heart gave a sickening lurch, followed by quick,

violent throbs that threatened to choke her, for at the open desk sat Fortescue, his arms thrown out across the litter of books and papers, his dark head bowed upon them.

The sight of such a man, ordinarily so confident and courageous, brought low in an abandonment of hopeless grief and dumb agony would have been infinitely moving to a stranger. How much more so to the woman in the doorway, biting her lips savagely to keep back the wild cry that rose to them at the sight of him.

Yet, despite his absorption, his mind was still quick and alert, trained to catch the slightest sound made by man or beast. Even as she stood hesitating, ready to fly, yet reluctant to leave him thus, the dark head was uplifted, and he swung round in his chair, revealing a face that might

have belonged to one twenty years older.

He made no sound as his eyes fell upon her, but that uncertain hand went up to his head in the old, familiar gesture, smoothing back the thick, dark strands, a hand that quivered visibly with the stress of his emotion.

It was the woman, as always, who recovered the power

of speech first.

"You—you are up early," she faltered; and then, as her eyes wandered over his disordered clothes and hair, the uncleared supper-table: "Why-I think-" Her voice shook despite the effort to control it. "Haven't you been to bed, John?" It was the first time she had used his name.

He gave a short laugh, inexpressibly bitter, exceedingly

painful to the hearer.

"Bed!" he said, rising wearily from his chair. "Do you think I was likely to sleep? I have sat here watching the clock make havoc of the last hours, counting them one by one—" He broke off from that abruptly. "Why are you up at this hour?"

"I could not rest; I—I felt I must get out into the air—take a last look——"

"You too!" he said, and, before she could add more, began to straighten his disarranged attire with clumsy fingers. "I will come with you-if I may-it will be the last time I shall spend an hour in your company---"

If she had any thought of refusing him she would have found it difficult. She had not the heart to say him nay; perhaps she, too, craved for one last hour. When he was ready they went out side by side in silence through the garden, brushing by Ah Wing's brilliant flowers with eyes that saw nothing of their order and beauty, out at the gate, and along the rough road until they reached the path that led to the stables.

Fortescue seemed to sense her errand then, the last good-bye to her pet, Silver Star, and turned towards her,

restraining her by a touch of the hand.

"Not yet!" he said hurriedly. "There is time for that later. I—I grudge every moment——" He checked himself with an effort, releasing her arm as if he had no right to hinder her movements. She made no reply, but her steps fell in beside his along the road that led away from the horses. So, with no further word between them, they came at last to the creek from which the homestead took its name, and, as if by common instinct, halted there beneath the shady trees on the bank where the deep-tinted leaves were already beginning to spread a rich autumnal carpet.

There was a fallen log on the grass. Marion, crossing to it, sank down to rest a moment, her hands clasped about her knees, her eyes fixed upon the rising sun, now bathing

the whole grey world with rosy light.

The man was too restless, too highly strung, to rest. He paced the grass with short, rapid strides, head thrown back, hands clenched and thrust deep into his pockets, until, tired out, he came to a standstill by the log and placed a foot upon it, bending down.

Marion inwardly shrank back a little at his close approach, and plunged into speech, an aimless, inconsequent

remark, in an endeavour to relieve the situation.

"How beautiful the morning is!" she said hurriedly.

"The weather—"

"Good God!" he broke in violently. "That you can think of the weather!"—and struck his knee with clenched fist.

She glanced up, her face expressive of faintly troubled surprise.

"Must sorrow and pain always shut out all that is good?" she asked wistfully. "Must grief always blind our eyes to everything that is fair and beautiful? Surely——"

"Can anything be good or fair on such a morning as

this?" he interrupted fiercely.

Her eyes left him, travelled slowly round over the rippling stream, the pink-hued sky, the perfect picture of an unmarred world about them.

"Can you look at this," she answered, with a slight gesture of the hand towards it, "can you look at this and not feel that life, for all its trials, is infinitely sweet?"

Fortescue made no attempt to follow her glance. His eyes remained steadfastly fixed on that figure beside him

on the log.

"You are a strange woman if you can find it so!"

"Strange?" She repeated the word slowly, pondering.
"I have never thought myself different from other women.
I think when the time comes, the need presses, we can all find the ounce of courage required to meet it."

Stung by her calmness, her quiet attitude, he said the

words that leapt to his lips, hastily, harshly.

"Courage! It might be called by another name—indifference!"

She sprang up as if he had struck her, and he saw her face

for the first time affronted and proud.

"'Have I been so long time with you and you know me not!'" she quoted passionately, the rich colour flooding her cheeks. "Oh, that you should have thought that of me!"

"Forgive me!" he pleaded hoarsely, shamed and humbled for his momentary loss of faith, trying to make amends. "You could never be anything but sincere. I ask your pardon. Believe me, my strength is tried beyond endurance this morning."

The aloof look faded, blotted out by tender compassion, as she gazed on his worn features, none the less handsome

and appealing for the trouble stamped upon them.

"I think I know you even better than you know me," she said quietly. "I can understand and feel deeply,

deeply for your suffering." A strange smile quivered across her face. "You think I take things easily—lightly—perhaps it is because"—the look, the tone, went to his heart like a knife—"sorrow and I have been so long acquainted that it has steeled my face and hardened my lips; only here"—her hands went up to her breast and lay there tightly clasped—"the scars are cut so deep I wonder, sometimes, if they will ever heal!"
"Much as I love you," he said roughly, "I could wish

"Much as I love you," he said roughly, "I could wish that the loss of me might carve another wider and deeper than all the rest together! Oh, take no heed of me—I am mad this morning—mad with pain, and longing, and—

and----'

He turned away, fighting the passion that beset him, struggling for self-control, for calmness.

"You think I do not grieve to leave you?" she asked

after a moment.

"I am not sure." He flung the words over his shoulder.
"To leave this place, this life—yes—but me——" He swung round to face her. "What are your thoughts concerning me this morning? I have been content with 'friend' till now; is that still all?"

She shrank back under the dominating glance with a

gesture that seemed to ward him off.

" Please!"

" Is that still all?"

"You have no right-no right-"

"You would be kinder to a dog!" he told her passionately. "Kinder, infinitely kinder, to Gerald——"

"No-no!" Her hands flew up to cover her ears.

"No, no; leave him out of this!"

He ignored the cry of protest stubbornly.

"To that man, who has brought you nothing, given you nothing, but the dregs of life——"

"Oh, stop! Stop!"

"No, I will not stop." He took a step closer, and, despite the movement to avoid him, gripped her by the shoulders, as he had done once before. "What do you think in your heart?—that heart I have never been able to fathom. You tell me of your courage—have you enough to be honest to

me as well as to yourself? You would comfort a soul in pain, in suffering. Am I not in hell, crying out for a cup of cold water?"

She stood perfectly still in his hands, her colourless face upraised, though her eyes were veiled from his sight beneath

the long lashes.

"Are you going to leave me to face the empty years without a sign, a look? Can you imagine my life after you are gone—the terrible, heart-breaking loneliness—with only one thought-of that other man? God! That's the worst-this tearing jealousy-"

"Would it not be better," she said faintly, " if you could bring yourself to pity him?"

" Pity!"

At least I have called you 'friend,' given you the best of my thoughts. You know you have my whole admiration and affection."

"What has he?" he asked sombrely, his eyes fastened

on her face as if he would search her very soul.

"An empty title, a loveless tie, a mockery of marriage, and a life filled with vice—and remorse."

Fortescue was silent. She added, through lips gone suddenly dry:

"You have the better part."

"I cannot realise that yet. I am only conscious of having waited all my life only to be cheated—given a glimpse of paradise at the cost of hell!"

He was startled by the sudden flare that lit her eyes as she looked up, wrenching herself away from his hold.

"Hell," she cried fiercely. "What do you know of it, who use the word so much? Nothing! I tell you, nothing! This is your first real trouble, your first set-back in the smooth places, and yet you talk and rail like a man damned to eternity." The force of her utterance, the unexpected vigour of the outcry, held him motionless. "What of me, to whom this is yet another curse, another agony to be borne, not in some quiet spot such as this, but before the staring eyes of the world? Must I add to my pain the memory of thoughtless words? Are you no better than the rest, ready to heap another burden on my shoulders? At

least give me something better than wailing and lamenting

to remember you by!"

Torn, stung by her quick scorn, Fortescue strode forward, and before she could escape caught her in his arms, crushing

her against his breast.

"Something better! Aye, take this to remember me by! What matters anything in the world but you and I—" he cried madly, as his lips found hers and clung there. To have released herself was impossible. Those arms about her, with their straining muscles, were like bands of steel holding her prisoner, the towering form, in its magnificent height and breadth, firm and immovable. He held her as easily as a little child.

But not for long. As suddenly as he had grasped her she was released by his stepping backward, and she had a vision of grey eyes set wide and horror stricken, of a livid face, and a hand slowly creeping upward to his mouth and touching it in the same manner as a man who has committed murder will look at his blood-stained hands—furtively.

Shuddering from head to foot, Marion covered her face, unable to endure the sight of him and his dumb despair. Knowing him so well, she suffered every pang with him, every stab of conscience that told him he had in a fit of madness committed an outrage from which in his saner moments he must miserably shrink.

Yet what right had she to comfort him—tell him he had given no offence—no offence? Why? Was it because—

because---

Her head sank lower and still lower for very shame at the thoughts that surged through her, her face and lips hot and burning with the remembrance of that all-enveloping kiss. If she lived another hundred years she knew that

nothing could wipe that memory out.

As she stood thus he watched her, breathing heavily, fearful of the moment when she would look up and denounce him, heaping scorn on his head. He dreaded, with the dread of a man already suffering to the full, the icy contempt with which she would speak to him, the glance of dislike—perhaps of hatred.

But he waited in vain. She still stood motionless, her

face hidden, and, tortured by the long silence, he stumbled forward.

"Mrs. Holt," he said hoarsely. "Mrs. Holt." And, as she made no answer: "Marion!"

Only the echo of his voice in reply. He made a swift

gesture of utter despair. What could he say or do?

"Marion, you will spare me reproaches, I know. I can't tell you-oh, what is the use of trying to excuse myself? I lost my head; but try to believe I'd sooner have lost my life than insult you. You know how I love you; think that I respect you, reverence you, despite---"

"Don't, don't!

He could only just catch the faint murmur, and went

closer, bending down.

"You won't let it mar our parting, Marion? You won't let it rankle in your thoughts, give you base thoughts of me in the future? I "-the simple words were infinitely moving—" I have fought very hard—"

"Oh, my dear-my dear-"

Just that, in a broken whisper, for answer, but sufficient to lighten the shadow on his brow. Strong fingers fastened themselves on her wrists, drawing the reluctant hands from her face, revealing it to his gaze.
"Look at me," he said quietly.

Slowly, with a great effort, she obeyed, and their eyes met in a long, steady glance that told without words all there was to tell. Heart spoke to heart, soul to soul, in that brief, sweet moment.

"It is not friendship-pity?" he asked presently, still

holding the small hands in his.

"It was never that—no, not from the first moment! Oh, John, you say you have fought hard, but how could you know I wanted—no, no, I must not say that! But you know that—that if it were possible——" Her voice broke, continuing after a moment with added firmness: "What can I say except that I love you very dearly with all my heart-always, always!"

Fortescue's eyes never left her face. His glance hung there oblivious to all else about him, seeing nothing but that,

hearing nothing but her voice.

"I thank my God for this," he said solemnly, and something in his manner of saying it, the deep, fervent gratitude so simply but perfectly expressed to the Master of Destinies, brought the tears in a quick rush to Marion's eyes. "I had dared to hope you might care a little. I only asked a small share in your affection, to be regarded as a dear friend, almost a brother. I wanted-I admit it without shame—a place in your thoughts for myself; but never think my intention was to deprive or outrival Gerald. God knows I loved him-dearly-before-" He could not finish it. "I never dreamt, never breathed even to my inmost soul, the suggestion that you might give anything more than sincere friendship until this morning. I never meant to say one word—never meant to lay as much as a finger on you. But why try to justify my actions to you?"

He laughed, with a note of joy in the depths of it, despite the pathos. "You understand, and will judge me merci-

fully, kindly, will you not?"

She smiled back through quivering lips.

"Ah, yes-yes!"

"And think of me sometimes—over there?"

"Always—always!"

He drew her close, and she rested unresistingly in the shelter of his arm, her head against his breast. So they stood, quietly, soberly, neither delirious with joy nor mad with excitement. The future before them was too forlorn, too hopeless, to permit of aught but a brief moment's peace and sweet communion.

After a while he said steadily—he had regained all his old composure with the knowledge that she loved him:

"You must write to me—both of you. I will never give up hope that some day you may come back. Promise me"—his voice had a ring of sternness—"promise me you will send if you ever need help, if you are in trouble, no matter what—"

She knew without asking that his thoughts had gone to Gerald.

"I promise; but I think you need have no fear, John." By God! I hope not!" he returned softly, but with

such grim resolution that she shrank a little, burying her face against his soft shirt.

"Please!"

"There, now I've frightened you." The exquisite tenderness was in sharp contrast to his former manner, the expression in the grey eyes bewilderingly sweet as they rested on the down-bent head.

"Do you know, I've been carrying something about in my pocket all the week for you? I can ask you if you will

have it nov."

Marion looked up, flushing hotly under his eyes, still trembling at the consciousness of his nearness, his dominating presence. Strangers, a few months ago—and now—

Her voice shook slightly as she answered him.

"I would have treasured it even if— What is it.

Tohn?"

Still holding her with one arm, as if fearful of losing her, he searched in his pocket with the other hand, bringing out something round, wrapped in soft paper.

"It belonged to an old Indian princess," he told her as he opened it, and disclosed a wide circlet of dull gold,

beautifully chised.
"A bracelet?" queried Marion doubtfully, as she examined it. It's rather large for that, isn't it?-but

very lovely."

"She wore it round her ankle." Fortescue smiled, and then, more gravily: "I want you to wear it here." And, gently pushing tack her wide sleeve, clasped the band on her arm just above the elbow. Then, bending his fine head. set the seal of his lips there.

"Let it stay," he whispered, as he straightened his back. She nodded, too moved to utter a word of thanks. And so they stood a moment longer in silence, until at last the dread time came then, with face pale beneath its tan, Fortescue looked at his watch, saying unsteadily:

"Half-past seven dearest."

She raised her fac to his, a face quite composed save the fleeting colour, even faintly smiling.

"We-we must go hen. This is good-bye, isn't it, my

dear?"

"I'm afraid so!" His arms tightened until she was nearly crushed, but she never winced-it is doubtful if she felt it. "You will remember, Marion-my Marythink of me?"

"Always—always!"
"Kiss me."

Their lips met and clung, not madly, wildly, but with

the solemn passion of renunciation.

"God bless and keep you, my dearest, my own love! If we never meet again remember I love you, and call you mine-in my heart!"

Bob Walton, meeting them by chance on the way back to the house, lowered his eyes and turned hastily aside to avoid intruding, for he knew instinctively the errand they had been on, and, despite his lack of polish, he had the soul of a gentleman.

But Marion, leaving Fortescue's side, hurriedly retraced her steps, and, coming up with him, caught him by the

arm.

" Bob!"

"Yes, ma'am?" he said, stopping abruply, but looking straight ahead, so that his glance should not make note of her grief.

"Will you do something for me-when Im gone, Bob?" Poor Bob, unable to resist the pathos of those last words, swallowed something in his throat, choking suspiciously.

"Sure!" he stammered, not daring to look round for

fear of making a "boob" of himself.

"It's not much to ask—only, will you please wait up at the house for the boss when he gets back from the station? It will seem so lonely—so reserted—" Her lips quivered piteously. "You will look after him, won't you?"

Bob looked round at that, very ed in the face, but

conquering his embarrassment manfully.

"I guess so," he said simply. "You ain't got no call ter fret-fer there's others what love him, Marion Holt!"

Their eyes met in a long, straigh glance, and:

"I know! It is my only comfrt," she said very low.

"I know you will do all you can without any prompting from me."

She turned to leave him, but he stayed her suddenly.

"Don't go!" he said quickly, redder than ever, and clearing his throat desperately. "I jest wanta say as how I'm real sorry 'bout that morning—you remember?—an' I want yer to know I ain't got nothin' in the wide world against you—I sure ain't, Mrs. Holt! I think you're the dandiest little woman as ever visited these 'ere parts, an' so does all the boys—an' I figur' it ain't no fault o' yourn 'bout him!"—jerking an expressive head in Fortescue's direction.

Impulsively Marion held out her hand, and he clasped it

in a good, honest, friendly clasp in his brown one.

"That's the nicest thing you could have said, Bob. I shall always think of you as one of the best friends I ever had. And try to believe, when you think of me, that I never meant to bring unhappiness—never meant to hurt him!"

Along the rpad again to the garden gate, in silence, side by side, and as they reached it the sound of music, low and sweet, drilling out through the sitting-room windows.

Marion Holt and John Fortescue, as if by common instinct, drew farther apart as they passed up the flower-edged path—and the shadow of Gerald, personified in the swelling strains, walked in between.

CHAPTER XVIII

BREAKFAST—breakfast for the last time in the familiar, pleasant sitting-room, served by Ah Wing, morose and silent, clad in sombre black trousers and coat as a sign of grief.

Realising the meaning of his attire as soon as he appeared, Marion tried to cheer him with a smile and occasional word of praise for the well-cooked meal, but, beyond an eloquent glance from the liquid eyes, he was dumb.

All were too oppressed with the knowledge of the coming separation to find words easily. Gerald tried to relieve the situation by talking, Fortescue playing up to his lead as best he could, but the conversation could not be anything but stilted and forced, a mockery of their happy chats together. Nor had they the smallest appetite for the meal. Though the men managed to eat enough to keep up the pretence, Marion was unable to swallow a morsel of the delicious food. Fortescue's keen eyes noticed that the bread on the plate was broken into little pieces by her restless fingers, but none of it touched her lips; the bacon cut up, only to be pushed aside. After a while she took a slice of crisp, buttered toast, but that, too, lay neglected. The strongcoffee, however, she drank down feverishly, as if consumed by a raging thirst.

At the first opportunity she made some excuse about her packing, and disappeared into the bedroon, Gerald following almost instantly, obviously to avoid any conversation with his host. He was always afraid that Fortescue might revert to unpleasant topics if they were left alone too long.

Marion was surprised to hear her husband enter, surprised and none too pleased. His presence was particularly obnoxious this morning. Was it not his fault they were leaving so suddenly? Was it not through him that the last days had been utterly spoilt? She busied herself at the dressing-table, ignoring him completely, and he stood for some minutes staring moodily out of the window, brooding over his fancied wrongs, working himself up into a fit of ill-humour which broke out presently in a bitter remark:

"I wish to God we'd never seen this place!"

His wife continued her occupation in silence a

moment, then, feeling compelled to make some reply:
"You owe your good health to it," she said quietly.
"Also a very interesting experience—"

He turned at that.

"You may have found it so!" And, after a pause:

"What time did you get up this morning?"

Watching her searchingly, he could not fail to notice the slight start she gave at the unexpected question, and swore under his breath, hands thrust deep into his pockets.

"Oh—early," she said hurriedly. "You were asleep." I know that "—moving across the room towards her.

"I suppose you went for a walk?"

"Yes."

"With Fortescue?"

"Yes. I went with Mr. Fortescue."

She made no pause in her movements as she answered, but he knew without telling that she resented his enquiries. It added to his annoyance; he was just in the mood for an argument, for a sense of shamefaced guilt, the knowledge that he had caused her unhappiness, and was held responsible for it by her, had made him irritable. He waited until she had finished her preparations and was again standing by the dressing-table, her face reflected in the glass.

"Rather a foolish thing to do!" he sneered pointedly. Their eyes met in the glass—his half-defiant, half-

ashamed, hers very composed and cold.

"Why?" was all she said, but a wise man would have been warned by the peculiar note in it not to pursue the subject further. Gerald heard, but the warning was disregarded. Anything was easier to bear than this studied aloofness.

"Oh"-in an attempt at carelessness-"he might

have made himself objectionable."

Objectionable! John Fortescue!

The rich colour flooded her cheeks at the covert insult, and not only for that, but remembering all that had taken place. The world would view his action in that light, call him presumptuous, insolent—perhaps worse—yet what right had she to defend him?

She controlled her emotion fiercely, unwilling her husband's eyes should see and draw his own inferences from it. She knew

how he would exult to find that she was not above suspicion. "You seem to be making a similar attempt!" she informed him.

He hated her for her unconcealed contempt, but he was never more conscious of a desire to crush her in his arms, silencing the rebellious lips with kisses; but he knew he dared not-yet! Later, away from Fortescue's influence, in England, he would show her who was to be master. He must be careful, though, mask his intention under a cloak of repentance and humble devotion. He knew he still stood on shaky ground, knew enough about her to feel that he must not risk too much at first. That dreaded signpost spelling "divorce" was ever before his gaze.

"I—I beg your pardon," he muttered, with downcast

eves. "I-mean-er-my infernal jealousy-"

A low laugh, infinitely incredulous and amazed, inter-

rupted him, bringing the furious blood to his cheek.

"My dear boy!" exclaimed his wife, with a touch of genuine amusement. "Has it become necessary to excuse your natural tendency towards rudeness? Don't please expect me to believe a plea of that kind. You must think me very simple—"

The cool retort, the laugh at his expense, roused his temper beyond control in a moment. Taking a quick step forward, he grasped her by the arm, his face flaming. "Jealous?" he snarled. "Yes, I am! I could kill

you both! But don't forget I'm your husband. Under-

stand? You're mine-mine!"

Marion, surprised and not a little startled at the outcry, hardly knew whether this display was called forth through genuine passion or wounded pride. She would rather it had broken out from the latter cause. Gerald roused to a renewal of love was an undesirable companion for the future for a woman who had none to give him in return. Her face paled at the mere thought, but she answered lightly enough.

"Don't be absurd. It doesn't suit you to play the jealous husband, nor have you any need to. Please take

your hand away."

"Why should I? I suppose a husband is entitled to hold his wife's arm if he chooses to?"

Hot words rushed to her lips, but, unwilling to create a

scene on this last morning, she choked them back, trying to check him by a light reply.

"Isuppose he may," she said, smiling faintly, "but the packing won't get finished at this rate, and the time is getting on."

The long, nervous fingers still retained their grip, the sullen eyes, with their smouldering fires beneath the surface, remained fixed on her face.

"Why can't you treat me decently?"

Again the hot reply ready, but forced back by an effort of will.

"I think I do," she returned quietly.

"You don't! I believe you're in love with this fellow.

Are you?"

He felt her stiffen, felt the soft arm under his hand grow rigid, saw her face hardening.

"Are you?" he repeated insistently.
She looked up, meeting his glance clearly.

"This is hardly the time to discuss such a matter," she said steadily. "At least, you have only yourself to blame if I am. What do you do to win my affection? Would you want it if you succeeded in winning it? I think you valued it very lightly in the past."

"I want you," he muttered roughly.

Her heart beat a shade faster at the tone, the glance, beat unpleasantly, almost fearfully, before the debasing,

sordid look of the beast uncurbed.

"I am still your wife in name, if that is any satisfaction to you," she forced herself to say. "You need not fear I shall forget my duty towards you, or be constantly reminding you of the past. It is for you to make amends; but until you have blotted out the remembrance of your sins

spare me any avowals of affection."

"You speak as if you hate me. What are we to be, then? Living under the same roof, yet separated, married in appearance, but in reality divorced? I will not tolerate such an arrangement, do you hear? I shall insist upon my rights." He was forgetting, in his rising passion, the need for caution. "You shall not treat me like dirt under your feet. I will not be ignored, avoided." He bent his flushed face nearer. "You swore to love and obey—then kiss me!"

He had held her despite her request to be released, but at that terrible expression, like a driven animal at bay, crossing her face, his hand instinctively loosened its hold and he stepped back, his courage dying in a moment.

"I would as soon"—she said very low, but the quivering voice bespoke the passion that beset her-" I would

as soon lay my lips against a leper's!"

Overwhelmed, he shrank away, staring at her blankly, with throat gone suddenly dry, parched. "Am-am I never to kiss you?" he stammered. "I am your husband!—your husband!" he repeated, as if the words in a measure reassured him.

The flare of wrath died as suddenly as it had sprung into being, the spasm of loathing passed, leaving her very white and worn. With a weary gesture, she turned away, moving

towards the door.

"I-perhaps I should not have said that. I realise it was unkind and-exaggerated. You were foolish to suggest it—this morning—my heart is too sore—" She broke off, flushing hotly, forcing the reluctant words to her lips. "You must not think I-I hate you. You must expect me to feel bitter and hard. But, if you honestly try to live a better life, perhaps some day-

But something even then stayed her, some instinct warning her to make no rash promises, and he was left

with the half-finished sentence ringing in his ears.

As the door closed behind the disappearing figure of his wife a slow smile began to dawn about his lips. He laughed softly, and, crossing to the mirror, stared at his reflection. Bronzed by the open air, handsome, dressed to perfection, the study of his own person seemed to give him some satisfaction—more so when he remembered others who had succumbed to the sway of his genius and charm.

"A question of time," he muttered. "A question of time—God! and then——"

But his anticipation was short-lived. As he stood thus another face in imagination rose beside his, a clean-cut face with keen, sparkling grey eyes and a broad, low brow crowned with thick, wavy dark hair-and turned away, his own gone bleak and dreary.

"If it wasn't for him, curse him!"

CHAPTER XIX

RE-ENTERING the sitting-room, Marion found their host making a pretence of reading a newspaper by the open windows.

He looked up as she came in, flinging aside the printed sheet with a quick gesture that betrayed the little interest

he had in it.

"I didn't expect you back so soon," he said, with an attempt at a smile. "But I'm glad, because I've been waiting here to tell you something."

"To tell me something?"—with an anxious, enquiring glance, the glance of one who is always expecting bad news

or trouble of some kind.

"Y' see, Dick Richards has just acquainted me with the fact that the boys are coming up in a few minutes' time to give you a small gift of some sort. I know it will be rather an ordeal for you, so I thought I'd best put you wise beforehand." He paused irresolutely, seeing the quick, startled look, the undecided air. "You don't mind, do you? If you'd rather not see them I'll send word along that you don't feel up to it; but I guess they'll be real disappointed."

"Of course they would be!" Marion exclaimed hastily, her tender heart conquering her nervousness. "You mustn't do that. I'll see them. I—I only hope——"

Fortescue turned away, biting his lips to keep back the soothing words that rose to them at sight of her distress. Their hour was over. It was for him to act up to the

position he must be content with in the future.

"Try to be brave," he said quietly. "The boys are real good fellows, and will understand just how you are feeling. Tell yourself all the while that it isn't really the last time you'll be seeing them—that you're only going back for a spell——"

There was an instant's pause as he broke off, too choked

to continue, and then Marion said a surprising thing.

"I know I'm coming back!"

Fortescue swung round with a start of utter surprise, so firm, so convinced was the tone in which she said it. "What makes you say that?" he demanded.

The smooth forehead wrinkled up into a little puzzled frown.

"I don't know," she confessed slowly, "but I'm sure -sure! Something tells me this isn't the end-something here." She laid her hand on her breast a moment. may be years before I come, but I know I shall!"

As if he listened to an indisputable authority, the man's

face lightened visibly.

"Then I'll never give up hope," he said passionately.

There came the sound of heavy, tramping feet in the

garden, of rough voices and short laughter.

"They're coming," said Fortescue, with a quick change of tone, and went to the door, flinging it wide. "Come right in, boys!" he cried, and Marion marvelled inwardly at his self-control, so quietly natural was his whole manner. "Mrs. Holt is waiting for your little surprise. Ah Wing, call Mr. Gerald."

Gerald followed in on the boy's heels, subdued for the

time being, and ready to make himself agreeable.

"What's the great idea?" he asked, forcing a smile. The boys had ranged themselves in two straight lines by the windows like a bunch of school-children in a class, very much spruced up for the occasion, with their clean shirts and bright handkerchiefs, their boots wearing a truly dazzling polish. Despite her grief, Marion could not forbear a smile as her eyes fell upon them, noting their shy embarrassment and furtive glances.

Evidently chosen as spokesman beforehand, Weston stepped forward at Holt's question, twisting his hat restlessly between his fingers and clearing his throat noisily.

"Mrs. Holt, an' sir-also boss an' boys-not fergettin' the Chink," he began, with a jerk of the head in Ah Wing's direction and another demonstration of throat-clearing. "It havin' come to our ears as 'ow it were time fer yer ter be hittin' the trail, it were our wish fer ter give yer a sorta mermenter-like of yer stay in these 'ere parts. We ain't got much notion 'bout what a lady likes—not bein' much used ter females—but we was agreed yer might like ter take this 'ere along with yer. . . . Jack, hike that bundle over!"

The bundle was duly "hiked" according to directions,

The bundle was duly "hiked" according to directions, and Weston continued, gaining confidence as he proceeded,

the words coming steady and clear. . . .

"We also wanta say, ma'am, that we give it to yer because you've bin real kind, an' because you've done so much fer us in lots o' ways. We've always bin 'appy 'nough without women up till you came, but there ain't one of us what 'as felt jest what it means ter hear a soft voice an' ter catch a bright, friendly look when you're working hard."...

With a stifled exclamation, Fortescue stepped back, his fingers shaking as he moved some papers aimlessly on the

table.

"I won't say as 'ow we liked the notion of yer comin'—we didn't!—but that weren't nothin' like we dislike yer goin'! An' all the boys want me ter say as 'ow they'll miss them cakes like—like hell!'"...

"Aye, aye!"—in a deep chorus from the rest. . . .

"That they wantcher ter come back." . . .

"Bet yer life! Sure! That's gospel truth, that is!"...

"An' they give yer this 'ere as a mark of their great

respec' an' affecshun." . . .

With tears in her eyes at the unexpected tributes paid her, Marion took the large, soft bundle he proffered in her hands and opened it, to reveal the skin of a magnificent black fox, commonly known as the "silver fox" on account of the glistening, silvery hairs that shimmered among the jetty blackness.

"Oh, John—Gerald—just look! Isn't it beautiful?" She lifted a flushed, delighted face to the boys, the expression of which more than repaid them. "Are you quite sure you want to give it me? Oh,"—she buried her face in the soft, silky fur with renewed rapture—"it's

lovely-lovely!"

Fortescue had come forward while she was speaking, and now put in a word.

"It is not only beautiful, Mrs. Holt," he said formally, but very rare also, and I hope you will not misunderstand me if I add, very expensive. I am proud to think the boys have parted with it for the sake of one of my guests. I think you will realise more fully the esteem in which you are held, and appreciate the gift still more, if I tell you——"

"Shucks!" broke in Weston deprecatingly, with an

uneasy glance at the others. .

"If I tell you," Fortescue repeated, with a twinkle in his eye, "that this skin came into their hands by accident about twelve months ago, and they have until now regarded it as a considerable asset, to be shared jointly when they could find a buyer——"

"Shucks!" growled Weston again. "Sure, the boys'd never sell it! They're too damn lazy ter take it down town. Ain't yer, boys? Say yer are, yer bone-heads,

or I'll---'

But it needed no threats. One and all swore lustily that the skin would rot before they would take the trouble to sell, and Tommy Brennan clinched the argument by adding solemnly and conclusively that if Marion refused it he would turn it into a foot-warmer for the buggy—a suggestion that vastly tickled the whole company.

Then Bob Walton, a silent and serious observer, stepped forward, and in a few careful words made his offering as foreman of the ranch, a brooch consisting of a straight bar of gold holding a Mexican opal of rare size and colour, a gift equally as exquisite as the other, yet to Marion neither were as the feel of that dull, engraved band encircling her arm under the sleeve of her dress.

A call from the back of the crowd:

"Won't the lady say a word?" And Marion, with the brooch at her breast and the fur over her arm, made instant

response.

"Boss!—boys!—and not forgetting the Chink!"... And a great roar of laughter went up; Weston, whom she had imitated, joining in whole-heartedly. Then her face softened, and she was Marion again, the Marion they knew, moved and tender....

"What can I say to you, except that I thank you from

the bottom of my heart, all of you, for your beautiful gifts, which I so little deserve, and for your great kindness and love towards me." . . . It was a strange word to use, and both Gerald and Fortescue started at the sound of it, but it fell naturally from her lips, and so the boys, in their simple, unaffected way, took it. . . . "You say you are sorry we are leaving, but you can never know how much we regret going. We came out utter strangers, knowing nothing of the country, the people, or the life; we go back feeling as if we are leaving home. These few months, so soon ended, will always be treasured in our memories as the happiest we have ever spent, and we shall think of you often in England, wishing we could be with you all again, recalling words spoken and pleasant hours spent at Lone Star Creek.

"I know my husband" . . . Fortescue winced, but understood, nevertheless, her motive in using that phrase, the same that prompted her to associate Gerald with herself throughout . . . "will join with me in extending to any of you that care to visit the old country our hospitality. No one would be more welcome! Isn't that so, Gerald?"

As she turned to him, Gerald looked up, showing in his manner that for once the situation had touched him, bringing out for the moment all that was best in his strange

nature.

"We should be delighted to see any of you," he said frankly, with that rare smile making his face singularly charming. "And I would really like to add my thanks and deep appreciation of these delightful presents you have given my wife. I am sure we shall think of you and talk over our holiday very often-eh, Marion?"

"And now," said Fortescue quickly, motioning towards Ah Wing, who was re-entering the room with a huge tray of well-filled glasses, "we must speed the departing guests

in the usual way."

He waited until all were served, none guessing from his self-possession the agony he was enduring as he stood with upraised glass.

"Marion, Gerald, good luck!—good health!—and a

safe journey! May the coming years find you with friends about you as true and sincere as those you leave behind at Lone Star Creek. Boys, I give you—Marion and Gerald Holt!"

With a hearty shout of confirmation that made the very rafters ring, the whole bunch drank the toast, and then, by common instinct, filed out one by one, each receiving as he passed a close handshake from both, and, what was treasured more, a smile and kindly word from Marion. Only Bob Walton, the last to touch her hand, was aware of the slow fading of her excited colour, the faint droop at the corners of the sweet mouth. Only he, as he said good-bye, caught the whispered words: "You will remember?"

They were all gone—and it was Fortescue speaking,

abruptly, to hide his anguish.

"I'll see about your luggage and the buggy."

Confusion after that—a bewilderment of pain. A last glance at the familiar rooms, a last hurried word to Ah Wing, the dim consciousness of hurrying through the garden and driving swiftly through a blurred countryside to the station. . . .

Only five minutes now. Fortescue sees to the bags, gives them their wraps, their newspapers. What is that? A warning shriek in the distance—a puff of smoke—nearer—in a moment. . . .

He turns to Gerald, hands outstretched, all grievances,

all bitterness, forgotten.

"Old friend, shake! God bless you, boy! I never wronged you, not in word or deed! Be good to her."

The train is in, amid general bustle and movement-

and in that instant he lifts her hand to his lips.

No sound—no word—no tears. One last, long glance, wrenched away by a supreme effort, and he stands alone, watching, watching that slowly receding train bearing away all he loves in life—fainter—fainter—her form more and more indistinct—nothing!

Like a man in a trance Fortescue turned his horses and rode back, senses dulled by the heavy blow. Mechanically he drove to the stables, groomed his animals, fed them,

saw to everything as usual, then set his feet in the direction of the walk they had taken that morning, that morning

he would never know again.

Afternoon came—tea-time—evening, and the gathering darkness. As the light of day faded the motionless figure lying in the grass by the fallen log rose up, and with weary feet dragged homeward, worn and utterly spent.

At the garden gate he paused, staring at the house—silent—empty—deserted. Oh God! his lonely hearth—

his lonely hearth!

He stumbled along, opened the door, and went in. How still it seemed—not a sound!

He turned the handle of the sitting-room door.

No—not deserted! Never say deserted, John Fortescue, with that voice, gentle as a woman's—aye, more gentle than many a woman's voice—ringing in your ears.

"Ole pal, I've been waitin' a long time for you!"

CHAPTER XX

"Well, you're back again, dearie!"

Thus did Marie Courtice greet Marion Holt one night about Christmas-time and some four months after the Holts' return from Canada.

It was the first occasion on which the three had met, and the scene, the Holts' dressing-room at the Victoria Palace, London. Marie, anxious to see and hear the results of the trip, had hurried in as soon as her act was finished, and now stood in the doorway, a resplendent vision in a peach-coloured evening gown cut daringly low on her opulent bosom, her heavily painted and powdered face beaming on her friend. Seated before the looking-glass, Marion turned swiftly on hearing the well-remembered, unmusical voice behind her and sprang up with a cry of pleasure, going towards her with outstretched hands.

"Marie! What an age since we met! I knew you were on the bill, and I guessed you'd come along. How well you are looking. Yes, and actually a little thinner, I do believe!"

Marie laughed good-humouredly enough.

"You're the first to notice it!" she returned, glancing down at her generous figure, more than generously displayed, very complacently, and then more seriously as she looked at Marion again, holding her at arms' length to take a good survey. "So are you!" she added abruptly. "What have you been doing to yourself? You don't look as if you've just had five months' holiday, I must say! And how's Gerald? You said much better in your letters—"

Marion motioned her friend to a chair, and reseated herself before the glass, leaning her arms on the toilettable before her. The flush of colour called up through Marie's unexpected entrance was fading, showing the cheeks to be sadly pale and thin, with dark rings under the heavy eyes. It was obvious, too, from her quick, aimless movements, the restless twisting of the rings on her fingers, and the continual fidgeting with the pots of cream and powder on the table, that she was suffering

badly from "nerves"—a fact Marie was swift to notice, also the way in which she fastened hurriedly upon her husband's name, as if to avoid enlarging on the subject of her own health.

"Gerald? Oh, yes, he seems fairly well. The change did him the world of good, as the doctor said it would. I hope he will keep so; we have a long run in front of us. Here he is!" she added quickly, as the door opened behind Marie. "Gerald, Marie is just enquiring after you."

To a casual observer Gerald Holt seemed the picture of health and strength, with his high colour and over-bright eyes, but Marie, reared in a mixed class of society, was not altogether sure that these outward indications were a sign of well-being in the man's case. Despite the flush on his cheeks, there was a pinched look about the nose and mouth; and as he shook hands, with a careless "Hello, Marie!" she caught the faint, unmistakable perfume of spirits. Her eyes narrowed thoughtfully—if it was possible for them to narrow any more—but she managed to conceal her interest under her usual jovial manner.

"Hello, old boy! Marion's just telling me you seem pretty fit after your rest. How did you like your adventures? My word!" She turned to her friend. "I never was more surprised in my life than when I got your first letter describing the ranch; I never dreamt it'd be like that!"

"Neither did we," returned Marion, with a faint smile. "It was the ideal—for anyone who would like that sort of life——"

"You liked it—I could tell that by the letters you sent. Glory!" She broke off sharply, and, to the Holts' surprise, rushed across the room, snatching up from a chair Marion's silver fox fur. "Wherever did you get this gorgeous thing?"—and flung it over her shoulders, preening herself before the glass.

"That?" said Gerald, with a short laugh. "Oh, a present from Marion's cowboys; one of them, the foreman,

gave her that brooch she's wearing."

Marie examined that as well, with varied exclamations

of envy and admiration.

"I say," she finished imploringly. "Can't you get me an intro. to that young fellow—that Fortescue chap, I mean?"

Marion laughed, and only Gerald noticed the start she gave at mention of the name.

"He knows all about you, Marie," she said a little

haltingly. "He—he was very interested——"
Go on! As if you'd spend your time talking about this chicken." She looked pleased, nevertheless. "Now I ask you, why don't these chances come my way? Here's a young good-looking girl like meself never gets the opportunity to meet a handsome millionaire! All the men I know with any cash to speak of are beastly, oily shonks---"

"I doubt if you would have made a great impression on Fortescue if you had met," put in Gerald drily, adding maliciously, as he glanced at the abundance of flesh before

him: "Unless you accidentally fell on him!"

"What!" cried Marie, with mock indignation. "D'you think he could resist these graceful curves—these flashing orbs!"

Both the Holts laughed; it was impossible to do anything but laugh, as she twisted and turned before their amused eyes as she was wont to do on the stage.

"He'd say you sure paid for good pasture!" said Gerald.

But Marion interposed with a quick:

"Don't believe that, Marie. Mr. Fortescue would never say anything so personal. Appearances weigh with him. He judges-"

"Oh, if you're going to expound on Fortescue's virtues," her husband interrupted, with a sneer, "I'll be off for a

stroll. How long are you going to be, Marion?"

Marion looked up. The smile was quite gone, but she answered him in her usual manner.

"About a quarter of an hour. I want a few minutes'

chat with Marie."

"Hello!" exclaimed her friend, as the door closed with a sharp bang. "What's given m'lord the huff?"

Marion shrugged her shoulders slightly, her face grown

a little hard and bitter.

"If you wish to know, he doesn't like being reminded of Mr. Fortescue's good qualities." She hesitated a moment, glanced at Marie's enquiring countenance, and added quickly: "They didn't part very good friends, as a matter of fact. I shouldn't say too much about Mr. Fortescue, Marie, unless you want him to fly into a rage."

"Humph!" said Marie. But, if her tongue was silent, her thoughts were busy enough. Marion had written rather freely during the stay at the ranch to her friend on the subject of their host, and Marie, inordinately shrewd through sordid experience, was beginning to draw her own conclusions.

"How's Gerald been behaving lately?" she added abruptly, after a somewhat awkward pause, Marion seemingly having no desire just then to go into details.

"Behaving?"

"Now don't pretend, dearie! You know what I mean. How's he treating you? Is he still as bad-tempered, or is he a little more amiable?"

Marion looked as if she hardly knew whether to resent

the outspoken enquiry or not.

"Oh, he's always—changeable," she said slowly, after a

moment.

"You might just as well say 'Same as ever!' then," retorted Marie. "I couldn't stick a man like that. One thing or the other's my motto!—civil or uncivil!—then you know where you stand and can act accordingly!"

"Well"—it was strange to hear that dry, sarcastic tone from Marion—"with one so uncertain you can hardly

find life monotonous!"

"It wouldn't suit me! I couldn't keep wondering how my old man was going to take things; why, it'd send me all of a dither! What's he got to be changeable about? He don't have no ups and downs like some. Plenty of engagements, draws big money, and the public ready to buy any old song he likes to turn out—what the deuce has he got to worry about?"

"At one time I should have said it was not worry, but just an irritable nature, but now——" Marion turned in her chair, laying a hand over Marie's own plump one as it rested on the table, her eyes very serious. "It seems a strange thing to say, perhaps, but for a long time I've wondered if he really has something, some anxiety, on his mind."

Marie looked puzzled, as well she might.

"Something on his mind? What do you mean?"

"I don't know exactly," Marion confessed. "He has been a model husband since we have been home—at least, to what he used to be." She paused irresolutely, undecided whether to confide in Marie or not, but old friendship and the loneliness of her position conquered. "We—we quarrelled bitterly just before we came away. He was most insulting to Mr. Fortescue. I—I couldn't stand it—he had been so kind—and—I—he—Gerald realised that I knew everything, knew the life he had been living——"She broke off, covering her face a moment with her hands. "It was horrible—horrible!"

"Cheer up, dearie!" cried Marie, with rough but ready sympathy, patting the white arm nearest her. "Don't you fret about that; p'raps it taught him a lesson."

The hands dropped, revealing a face very worn and troubled. "It alarmed him badly," she answered simply. "He

thought I was ready to divorce him-"

"There you are! P'raps he'll reform after all-"

"I don't know about that, but he has tried to make me believe, ever since, that—that he cares for me like—like I once wished he would." She flushed hotly under Marie's astonished look.

"Glory!" exclaimed the older woman, with more emphasis than tact. "Who'd have thought it? Well," searching Marion's face with sudden keenness, "what's the trouble then? 'Fraid it's not genuine?"

"No," said Marion very low. "Only too afraid that

it is I"

An interval of silence after that.

"Heigho!" said Marie presently, with a profound sigh from her ample bosom. "It's a rummy old world." She stared thoughtfully at the drooping figure before the glass. "It's this other chap causing the trouble, I suppose. Gerald finds himself forestalled, eh? That accounts for the 'huff.'" She hummed a little under her breath. "Well, what's the finish to be?"

"The finish?" Marion looked up in surprise. "Why,

we've just got to make the best of it, that's all."

"And what's your attitude towards Gerald?"
The dark eyes were swiftly lowered again.

"I—I try to be kind. Of course"—she gathered her courage together—" there can never be any question of—of sentiment——"

"You mean, to put it bluntly, you're husband and wife in name, and that's all there is about it." Marie shrugged her shoulders. "How long d'you think that'll last? I tell you, dearie, not long! You'll have a nice old shindy with Gerald presently, mark my words!"

"A shindy?"

"Yes, a shindy!" Marie shook an emphatic finger at the pale, startled face. "Either he'll insist on his rights as a husband or he'll find an outlet some other way. If you want to keep him straight you've got to make it

worth his while-that's my opinion."

"Do you mean "—Marion's eyes flashed indignantly—"do you mean I am to bribe him to live decently? That I must forget the years of coldness and neglect, the long years of infidelity, and welcome him with open arms? No, Marie—impossible!"

Again Marie shrugged her shoulders. "I'm not blaming you, dearie—"

"I should hope not!" Marion returned somewhat coldly. "You who know so well the life I have led should be the last to suggest such a thing. He knows the position. When we reached home he made certain overtures, and—and I told him then quite plainly that I had nothing to give him, that I was ready to work for him, do my duty by him as I had always tried to do, but I could not give what was already (God forgive me) given to another."

"And he took it all right? Made no fuss?"

Marion turned away, the crimson flush dying her cheeks anew.

"No," she admitted hurriedly. "He is very persistent.

He seems to think as time goes on I shall change.

"And if you don't it'll be Susie Belmore or Pamela Cartwright over again—y' see, I know more than you think!—or something else as bad; another breakdown to wind up, and his career finished. Well, as I said before, I ain't the one to blame you, 'specially if you're sweet on this Fortescue chap——"

"Marie!" Marion sprang up. "How dare you insinuate that I would treat Gerald badly on that account? How little you know me! I tell you, if my husband was a good man, one I could admire and respect, I would do anything—anything to atone for my—my sin. Yes, it is a sin, I realise it more every day, to know that every fibre of your being is crying out for another man, for the sound of his voice, the touch of his hand. But I cannot humble myself to Gerald. At times he is much better, but even now when the situation proves irksome he says cruel, unjust words that shrivel any spark of affection I might have for him. I believe, if he dared, he would sometimes try physical force!

"And there are other things, Marie." She laid a hand on the other woman's arm, sinking her voice. "He is drinking heavily. You guessed? Well, I cannot think that is my fault; I hardly know what to think. I noticed it on the way home, and when I remonstrated with him he said it 'made him forget.' Marie, I'm sure there is something besides this on his mind. He wakes up in the night crying out that 'it's a lie,' and he 'must get away.' He seems—there are no other words for it—frightened to

death. How can I---"

She broke off abruptly, with a warning glance, as the door opened and Gerald entered, very flushed and reckless-looking. It was obvious that his stroll had been to the nearest bar.

"Hello!" he said, slapping Marie's bare shoulder—an action that told its own tale—"haven't you finished yet?" He laughed noisily, his eyes turning to his wife. "What's the matter with you?"—the grin fading as his burning glance noted the hint of tears in the dark eyes, the slight, shrinking movement as he drew near. "Been unfolding your troubles to Marie? Gerald been a bad boy, eh?"

"I'll be going," said Marie abruptly, getting up from her chair. "Cheerio, dearie! I'll call in to-morrow." She stooped, kissing the pale face kindly; then, turning to Holt, laid a firm hand on his arm, compelling him to look at her. "Ease up, Gerald!" she said significantly.

"What d'you mean?"

[&]quot;You know what I mean! It's a fool's game for you,

boy, with a groggy heart. Take my tip and leave it alone. So long!"

As the door closed he swung round.

"What have you been saying?" he demanded furiously. "Saying?" Marion drew herself up with quiet dignity, her face hardening. "If I said you were drinking heavily it would only be the truth, a truth most people who meet you are becoming aware of. I don't know how you expect

to keep your health or your engagements in that condition." He went closer, laying a hand on her arm, a hand hot

and dry from the fever that consumed him. Looking into his face as she did then, it was impossible to mistake the flush for that of health, and the eyes now were no longer bright, but heavy and clouded.

"It's your fault," he said thickly. "You're driving me to it—you and—"

"I think you need very little driving," she interrupted coldly. "What have you got on your mind?"

His face changed. A look almost of terror came into

He clutched at her arm, drawing her close.

"If you knew! Marion, you meant what you said? You won't leave me? Whatever I've done in the past, I love you now, madly! God! if only I could wipe it all out!"

It was a bitter cry of despair, of remorse, from a soul unsatisfied. Marion shuddered, but her expression softened, as it always did when the tone changed from bullying to entreaty.

"You can only wipe it out by living a good life, Gerald," she said softly. "Please, please don't let another vice

get its grip on you-for both our sakes."

He could not withstand the alluring face so near his own, with its unusually gentle look. He suddenly snatched her to him, holding her to his breast, kissing the soft, red lips hotly, fiercely.

She suffered the embrace in silence, apparently passive, yielding to his wishes, but Gerald was not deceived. He thrust her from him in a moment with an oath, his aspect

wild and unrestrained.

"You don't love me! You never will love me! If I drink myself to death it'll be through you-through you and John Fortescue! Don't forget that!"

CHAPTER XXI

On the lonely ranch in the foothills the days went on much as they had done before the coming of the English visitors, save that in one man's heart joy was long since dead and hope fast dying. Not that he pined or outwardly made manifest his grief. That was not John Fortescue's way. Business was attended to as religiously as when his life was care-free, boys and animals cared for as hitherto they had been cared for. Small wonder if many began to think that the boss was "getting over" his trouble.

One man knew better than the rest. Bob Walton, who, since that never-to-be-forgotten day when he had sat for so many hours waiting, torn with anxiety and vague fears, had taken up his quarters in the house, he realised

the depths of that concealed heartbreak.

Autumn deepened into winter; Christmas came and passed. Lonely months, quiet months, of hardworking days and long, dark evenings spent by the blazing fire, Bob on one side the hearth, Fortescue on the other, speaking little, each with his pipe and his thoughts—doubtful if those same thoughts were harder for one man than the other.

Several times had Bob tried to prevail upon his boss to take a rest, go right away for a spell, but he met with no success. It seemed to him that Fortescue clung the harder to the scenes of the past hours, as if they were the only things left to him, and, though Bob would gladly have taken an axe to the piano, with its haunting memories, he dared not do so.

Never fond of the town, Fortescue now seldom entered it, and knew little of its doings. Bob gave him what slight news of interest there was when he returned each week with the mail.

The mail! How his heart bled each time he brought it to witness the suppressed eagerness, the keen glance, so pitifully anxious, searching among the letters for the sight of that well-known feminine hand. The relief when he found it; the low, heart-rending sigh when it was missing.

What torture he endured only Bob knew, knew and wondered how long the fine frame could stand the constant racking.

It was just because he knew that, coming back with the bag one evening, he entered the fire-lit sitting-room with dragging feet and heavy heart, his face lined and furrowed like that of an old man.

Fortescue was in his usual place, in one of the leather chairs by the hearth, a book on his knee, but it was evident that his attention was far away from the printed pages, too dim to be read in the fitful light. He turned as Bob threw open the door, turned and sprang up, eyes kindling at sight of the letters, as they always did, and came to the table, his hands instantly busy sorting them out.

To avoid any appearance of curiosity Bob, as a rule, took his own to the fireplace, but to-night they lay neglected, and he stood with his broad back to the mantelshelf, his

clouded blue eyes watchful of every movement.

A large, sealed package was Fortescue's lot this time, and he flung himself into his chair, strong fingers easily snapping the string that bound it, tearing aside the outer cover. It was a portrait, full length, of Gerald and Marion Holt, as Bob had seen them that night, long ago, through the closed windows—Gerald at his own piano, with Marion beside him. Hungrily Fortescue bent over it, scanning every detail, the well-remembered slender form, the faintly smiling lips and eyes, scanned them with such a look of suppressed passion that Bob lowered his gaze for a moment.

"Bob!" The packet was held out to him presently, not the letter contained therein. Old friends as they were, he could not share that, though God knows all the world might have read it. "You'll like to see this."

Bob took it silently, almost reluctantly. It was very like, very like! Strange that his glance should fasten itself so persistently, so searchingly, on Holt's face, as if he saw it for the first time.

"What do you think of it?"

Fortescue had read his letter, read it twice, and now sat looking up at Bob with it held fast in his hand, the lines in

his forehead not so marked, as if some magic touch had

soothed the pain for an instant.

Bob noticed it, and was too choked to speak. Oh that it should fall to him to bring more shadow into this man's life! He who loved him, aye, loved him better than any woman could. He stammered so in his almost inaudible reply that even Fortescue, absorbed as he was, remarked it.

"What's the matter, Bob? You look upset—"

"I reckon I am," returned Bob, lowering his eyes. —I heard some bad news, and it sorta turned me sick." "Bad news?" Fortescue looked genuinely surprised.

" Where ? "

" Down town."

The half-smile gave place to a puzzled frown as Fortescue continued to stare at his foreman.

"Down town? Why, what has happened, Bob?"

No answer, but something in the averted head, the drooping shoulders, of the man beside him roused Fortescue to alertness. He got up and gripped Bob by the arms, forcing him to turn.

"Out with it!" he commanded. "What's the trouble?

Can't you speak?"

"Can you, when you're knocked all of a heap?" flared Bob. "Can't you see it's something—it's something—"

"I can see it's something uncommon," put in Fortescue

drily.

He waited a moment, thinking, studying the boy's face. "Anyone we know?" he asked quietly.

"You might guess it was," came the muffled reply. "Think I'd feel bad if it wasn't?"

Fortescue was inwardly more startled than he appeared to be. What could have disturbed Bob to this extent? Now he thought of it, the youngster had seemed rather worried lately.

"Can't say there's many folks to interest us down town,

Bob, or their troubles either-"

"One's enough, ain't it?"

"Sure! One's enough, if it's one that matters. to think of it, one is about the figure, isn't it?"

Ominous silence. Despite his self-control Fortescue

felt a chill—of what?—horror—dread—vague suspicion. "Only one," he repeated, paling a little.

Bob raised his head. Blue eyes met grey ones in a

long, steady stare.

Bob!" It was Fortescue who broke the silence in a low, hoarse whisper. "What are you going to tell me? No, don't speak! For God's sake don't speak a moment."

He dropped his hand from the other man's shoulder and stumbled to the fire, staring blindly into its blaze, nerving himself. After a brief pause he looked round, eyes grown hard as steel, lips set, the words coming rapidly.

"There's only one we care anything about. You can tell me. Dolly—is she dead?"

It was all he could think of. Bob would never look, never speak like this unless the worst had happened. An accident—her horse—the thoughts rushed through his brain in a jumble.

"Dead!" echoed Bob blankly. Then, quickly realising the conclusion Fortescue had jumped to, his voice faltered.

"No, she ain't dead!"

The sudden relief was so great his boss broke into an

involuntary laugh.

"You great boob!" he exclaimed, his face clearing. "What a scare you gave me!" He laughed again, pulling out his pipe. "If she's not dead, she must have eloped—married! That's the only other reasonable catastrophe-"

There was no answering smile on Bob's face.

"She ain't married." His voice shook pitifully, despite his manhood, but steadied almost immediately as he got those other words out. "More's the pity!"

The bronzed hand lifting the pipe to his mouth was suddenly arrested, narrowed eyes fastened themselves on the quivering face, with its awful look of agonised grief and horror.

"What the devil are you driving at, Bob?" Fortescue

asked sharply.

Again their eyes met in a long, penetrating stare. And, as if he read something on Bob's face too terrible to contemplate, Fortescue's hand flew up to cover his eyes, staggering back with a dreadful cry:

"Not that! Bob, not that!"

No answer. He lifted his head, a spark of hope rekindling in his look, dispelled again as swiftly.

"Yes—that!"
"My God!"

That was all. He took the blow as he had taken others, silently, sinking into his chair, grey to the lips, but steadily composed.

Not so Bob. The news once communicated, he regained his usual impetuosity of speech, and the whole thing rushed

out in a torrent.

"She ain't been well a long time, boss! I noticed, you must ha' noticed if you hadn't been so took up with—other things." He meant no reproach, but it was a bitter one to the man listening. "She weren't like herself at all. I thought maybe she fretted over Missie Holt leaving. I didn't dare "—again that pitiful shake—"I didn't dare think——But after a while I—I sure began ter wonder. It's a thing what can't be hid long. An' then folks began ter talk—mighty loud, too, some of 'em. Boss, she must ha' gone through hell!"

Motionless he sat, face half turned away, fingers gripped

tight upon his chair.

"It were a marvel Costello never tumbled to it. He 'peared quite ignorant like till las' night—las' night—"

Fortescue started, raising his head.

"Las' night some hell-cat, mad drunk, said it right out in the crowded bar! An' old Tom, standin'——"

A stifled exclamation from Fortescue as Bob stopped, choking in his throat.

"What happened? Quick! Finish it!"

"Can't you guess what he'd do? Can't you guess what'd make me sick? He threw her out—without a rag, 'cept what she'd got on her back an' a shawl she snatched up—threw her out!"

Fortescue was on his feet, eyes blazing in his livid face,

his breath coming in great gasps.

"Bob! Bob!"

"Blast him! blast him!" cried Bob in a fury of rage.
"Think of it! In this weather." His outflung hand indicated it. "Snowing like hell, an' nowhere ter go!"

"Be silent, will you." Fortescue's voice, harsh and stern, checked him. "Is there news of her? Did anyone

see her-know which way she went?"

"She took the train to Victoria—'pears she's got an aunt there—but there's no news of her. I telegraphed, soon as I heard 'bout it. She must ha' left the train somewhere on the journey."

"That's a clue. Get the horses out; I'm going down

to her father."

"No, boss." Bob was red in the face and stammering in an instant. "Don't go. He's mad, I tell you."

"Get the horses."

"Boss, he's raving! He's-"

Without a word Fortescue thrust him aside and strode to the door, but Bob was after him, holding him back by sheer force.

"You don't understand, boss. He's mad, I tell you-

mad ter get that man who-who-"

He could not finish it, but Fortescue seemed to suddenly grasp his meaning. He stood still.

"What has that to do with me?" he said harshly.

"Why try to prevent me seeing him?"

"Don't you see? She were here a powerful lot-more'n

anywhere else."

"So I'm one of the suspects!" said Fortescue grimly, drawing a deep breath. "And you? What about you, Bob?"

"Me an' all! Every man jack of us! He swears he'll

shoot on sight; he's half crazed with drink."

The only answer, after a moment, was a repeated, "Get the horses!" And at the tone Bob went without another word.

Neither spoke on the way down through the fast-falling snow. Bob stole a glance once or twice at the set face beside him, but it told him nothing, and he dared not break the silence.

At the saloon door they dismounted, and, turning to enter, ran full into a black-clad figure crossing the rough pavement with down-bent head.

The man glanced up quickly, revealing the familiar face

of Lone Star Creek's sky-pilot, the Rev. Thomas Johnson. He gave a start of surprise and paused involuntarily.

"Mr. Fortescue!"

Fortescue stopped abruptly, with a curt:

"You want me?"

"Only to ask if—if you've heard—"

He was a young man, new to the West and naturally modest, and there was some halting embarrassment in his tone. There was none in Fortescue's bearing. His grey eves held the other man's gaze very steadily.

"I've heard about Miss Costello, if that's what you mean," he said quietly. "I've come down to see her

father.

Mr. Johnson shook his head.

"I'm afraid you can do little here," he said sadly. is beyond all reason. For your own sake, Mr. Fortescue, I should keep out of his way. I understand she spent a considerable amount of time at your place. Don't think for a moment," he added quickly, a flush mounting to his cheek, "that I attach any significance to that!"

"Thank you," Fortescue replied, his glance softening for the first time. "I fully appreciate your remark.

Now, if you'll excuse me-come, Bob."

The saloon was crowded as usual, more crowded, if anything, owing to recent events, the unlooked-for entrance of the two men causing a buzz of comment.

Ignoring it, Fortescue made straight for the bar, where a man was busy serving drinks-Bob following close on

his heels-and asked for Tom Costello.

The man answered civilly enough that he was in his room, not able to see anyone.

"He'll see me right enough," said Fortescue.

go through."

He went, despite the fellow's protest, and, passing along a passage behind the bar, knocked on a closed door at the end of it. There was no answer. Turning the handle, he opened it quietly and went in.

The man they were seeking sat at the centre table in his shirt-sleeves, his head buried on his folded arms. His attitude, his dishevelled appearance, the half-emptied bottle beside him, all told their tale. Tom Costello had worshipped his only daughter, and her disgrace had crazed him, driving him to seek oblivion the way many seek it.
"Drunk," said Bob laconically, as they stood looking

at him. His tone was devoid of all pity.

"And miserable," added Fortescue very low.

He went forward, touching the man on the shoulder.

" Costello I"

He stirred restlessly, but made no answer, and again Fortescue said:

" Costello!"

He roused then, raising his unshaven face and bloodshot eyes, but it was obvious by his vacant look that he had not grasped the situation.

"What d'yer want? Who is it?" he growled.

" "John Fortescue."

He was up in a flash, sending his chair crashing to the ground, his hand flying round to his hip, a devil incarnate, as he realised who was speaking. The man before him never moved, never flinched, or made the slightest attempt to defend himself, and his very stillness checked the murderous intent. The fingers closed on the gun, but it was not drawn.

"Drop your hand, Costello!" said Fortescue.

Swaying on his feet, the man swore violently, letting loose a flood of filthy language and vile insinuation. Bob Walton moved uneasily, fingers itching, but his boss waited quietly, only the furrow in his brow betraying the grip he was keeping on his temper.

When the flow of eloquence was at last exhausted he

put in his word.

"You're on the wrong trail, Costello. Look at me!"

The stronger will had its way. The bloodshot eyes lifted, scanned reluctantly the face before him, stern set, resolute, composed—and the hand fell from the gun. No one could look at that face and believe the man guilty. It is doubtful if in his heart Costello had ever thought it.

He righted the chair, and dropped into it, antagonism

gone, but bitter and sullen, nevertheless.

"What d'yer want?"

"To help you," said Fortescue. "And to help your daughter."

"Daughter? I've no daughter! She's no girl o'

mine."

He turned away as if he would dismiss them, but Fortescue made no attempt to go. He went closer, looking

down on him.

"Your daughter," he persisted steadily. "All the more in need of kindness and sympathy now, Costello. You did a cruel thing last night when you turned her out; but it's not too late, thank God! to remedy it. We'll work together to find her."

"Find her? Who wants to find her?"

"I do; you do."

An ironical laugh interrupted him.

"I do? I know better!"

"You're beside yourself. It's been a shock, I know; but we'll soon trace her and bring her back. You can suggest places where she may have taken refuge. Think of it, man, a young girl, in that condition, wandering about, perhaps in the open, on a night like this."

The low, vibrating tone was moving enough to melt anything but a heart of stone. Costello must have had

that, for not a muscle of his frowning face altered.

"She's made her bed; let her lie on it!"

"You can't mean it! When we get her home-"

"Home? What home?"

Fortescue drew a deep breath, clenching his hands, but again he controlled himself, remembering the blow this man had been dealt.

"What home? Why, where else but—"

"Not here! There's no home for her here, and never will be! Fetch her back if you like, Fortescue, but you'll get no help from me—and this door's shut! Understand? Shut! I never want to see her face again, the——! I'm done with her—for good! Now"—he laughed ferociously as he noted the look of horror—"now, where're you going to take her when you find her?"

"Take her?" Fortescue threw back his fine head, the light of an undaunted purpose in his eyes, his face

deadly pale but resolved. "God helping me," he said slowly, "she shall find a home——"

" With me!"

It was Bob's voice breaking in, literally taking the words out of Forescue's mouth. If the latter was pale, Bob had enough colour for two. His face was scarlet, blue eyes ablaze.

Costello, lumbstruck, stared in amazement from one

to the other.

"Bob!" Fortescue swung round, equally astonished.

" Wal?"

They looked at each other steadily, man to man, for a long moment

"Bob, thirk-think what you're saying!"

"Think!" cried Bob violently. "I've been blasted well thinkin' long enough, I reckon; it's 'bout time I spoke!" He lew at Costello, white-hot with rage. "You—! D'you think we'd bring her here, eh? Think we'd fetch herback for you ter raise hell and break her heart—if it aint already broke? Braggin' 'bout yer shut doors, an' yer tten home what's too good for sech as her ter enter!" Sorn, bitter scorn, shook the sturdy voice. "Who's ter blane for this, eh?—eh?" At his furious advance Costell fell hastily backward. "Why, you, you!—with yer ilthy saloon, where you was ready, for all yer high-flowitalk what nearly turns me sick, ter use her good looks to get the men in! Have you ever took care of her? Procted her like you should?

"'No daughte o' mine!'" He laughed, but there was little mirth it. "Don't fret yerself, Costello! When we find her is my wife she'll be, if she'll have me! Get that? My wi)—what I always meant ter ask her ter be when she'd had ir fling and sorta settled down. This don't make no diffence ter me! There ain't no one ter care 'bout me! I alt got no folks or relations ter skeer! Go ter hell! That'all we gotta say ter you—go ter

hell!'

Oh, the look on Forscue's face, if only Bob had turned to see it!

As the latter finished, panting with the passion of anger that beset him, his boss stepped forward, laying a steadying hand on his arm, eyes turned keenly on the lowering face of Costello.

"You've heard," he said curtly. "Anything to say?" There was no answer, though he gave the man a moment

or two to redeem himself. As he still kept silent:

"Come, Bob," he said quietly, "we're losng time"-

and led the way out without another glance.

Long into the night Fortescue worked it his desk, making plans, studying maps, writing detectives, mounted police, any who might be instrumental in traing the girl. Never once did he refer to Bob's outburst, though he sat at the table near him, his companion throughout the dark hours.

Once, unable to bear the silence, Bob burt into speech.

"You ain't riled, boss?"

"Riled?" Fortescue glanced round, with a strange look. "What about?"

"'Bout what I said to Costello," said Bolmiserably.

Fortescue smiled for the first time.

"I'll talk about that later," he answerd briefly; and

Bob had to wait as best he could.

After another long interval Fortescuethrew down his pen and swung round, leaning back to sca the boyish face searchingly.

"Finished?" asked Bob, with a sigh f relief.
"Quite! Anything else you can sugest?"

"There ain't nuthin' I wanta sugges; I reckon you've thought of 'most everything. But 'ere's somethin' I wanta ask you—"

Perhaps Fortescue guessed what tat something was. His face hardened instantly, the eyesrew steely bright.

"Out with it!"

"Boss, what's goin' ter be done-out him?"

Silence a moment. Fortescue's expression told him nothing. At last he said.

"We're finding the girl first."

"I know," said Bob. "But aer—boss, what's goin' ter happen to that man?"

Fortescue raised his eyes, and in that look Bob read grim,

unalterable determination and purpose.

"Exactly what she suffers he shall suffer. If I have to hunt for him the length and breadth of the world, I'll find him—and he'll pay! By God! he'll pay—to the uttermost farthing!"

Bob's hard dropped. He stood up, fierce satisfaction in every line of him. If the boss said the man would pay

it was as gold as done.

He never isked "who." Both felt that the other knew, and were content to leave it there until they had sure and positive proof.

Fortescue rose also, his manner again calm and controlled.

"Bob," he said quietly, "which of the boys in our bunch would nake the best foreman?"

Bob started as if he had been suddenly shot, his eyes

wide and amajed.

"Foreman?' he repeated blankly, hardly believing his ears, and then stood staring dumbly, the colour fading from his cheeks. Was this to be the answer to his question, "Are you riled, boss?"

"Yes, foremat," said Fortescue steadily. "I'm sorry, Bob, but the factis you don't suit me in that capacity."

His heart misgave him as he saw the painful flush, the quivering lip which, man as he was, Bob could not still. "I—I done my lest," he said simply, with a great gulp.

"Best!" A strong arm was suddenly flung round the drooping shoulders, sey eyes alight with proud affection beamed down on the troubled, boyish face. "You great boob! I couldn't resit giving you a scare. I'm wanting a foreman, Bob, because I'm giving you a better job!"

"Better job?" echoel Bob stupidly, the shadow on his face lightening visibly, but still failing to grasp Fortescue's

meaning. "A better jo, boss?"

"Boss!" Fortescue's voice shook between laughter and tears, his hand grippin hard the shoulder it rested on. "You great fool!—it's prtners, boy, partners! Now do you understand?"

CHAPTER XXII

As completely as if the sea had closed over her Dolly Costello disappeared that winter's night, and though unlimited resources were employed no trace of her could be found.

Still, through the following spring and summer months the search went on, every slight clue followed ap, regardless of time and expense, by Fortescue and his villing helper, Bob Walton. Letters continued to arrive from England at intervals, longer intervals than formerly, preathing the spirit of unchanging affection, but they seemed to have lost their old magically soothing power. Bob noticed that though he read them rapidly, eagerly, as before, the shadow deepened, not lightened, on Fortescue's brow.

Bob gathered, from the little information the older man extended, that the Holts had no lack of engagements, and, after a successful London season on their eturn, had been on tour in the provinces during the summer months, enhancing their reputation and making big money—at which news Bob's face would harden perceptibly, his teeth clench fiercely on the stem of his pipe. Of Gerald Holt's frequent collapses, his habitual dinking-bouts and alternate fits of recklessness and depair, they learnt nothing from Marion's quietly cheerfu' letters.

"You don't think," said Bob suddenly one evening, as they sat by the hearth in the firelight, just such a night as that terrible one nearly a year ag when Fortescue had heard the truth about Dolly—wild, and bitterly cold, with the snow falling fast, "you don't think we'll never find her?"

For the first time in all those wary months the sturdy, boyish voice held a ring of dark lespair, and, hearing it,

Fortescue looked up with a start

"No, boy—no," he said hastily "I still have hope——"
He broke off abruptly, but Bb understood. Unless she
was dead! That was what th boss meant. Dolly dead!
Dolly, so full of life—gay, laghing, happy Dolly—dead!
Bob shuddered, and was silest for awhile, but not for long.

"She'd ha' spent all her money by now," he said aloud, as he turned things over in he mind in his own simple way.

Fortescue nodded, eyes taring into the flickering fire.

Both men were thinking of Dolly's aunt at Victoria, who had told them that the girl, during her stay there, had

received a letter containing money.

"She had a pearl necklace," added Bob, after a brief moment. "She might ha' sold that. She told me once, when I asked her if it was real, that it was worth a powerful lot."

"Not enough to keep her very long, I'm afraid."

Bob groaned under his breath.

"An' she couldn't work—not for a long time—"

Again a long silence, neither man caring to speak his thoughts aloud. In his heart Fortescue was more despairing than Bob dreamt, but for the latter's sake he dared not show it.

Everything possible had been done, and still there were no results. What wonder if he, too, began to say inwardly:

"Shall we ever find her?"

A gust of wind, wailing weirdly, shook the house with a force that threatened to uproot it from the ground, dying away in a whispering moan.

Bob suddenly sat up, startled, listening. "Did you hear anything?" he demanded.

"No! What-?"

After a moment of strained attention he sank back in his chair.

"I—I thought it sounded like a sorta cry." He laughed brokenly, rubbing his hand across his eyes with a slight, futile gesture. "I'm kinda imaginin' things, most like."

Fortescue said nothing—there was nothing to say—but

his face was eloquent.

No word of encouragement leapt to his lips to-night; no quick gesture betrayed a passing gleam of hope. He felt utterly despondent, played out, almost ready to admit defeat—and the thought of Death was ever present, haunting him. For Bob's sake he concealed it, strove to keep it hidden, but it was there, persistent and nerve-racking.

For another few minutes they sat in silence, while the

wind whistled in the chimney incessantly.

"There!" It was Bob, springing to his feet, with

that startled look intensified.

"I heard that," said Fortescue quickly, on his feet almost as soon as Bob.

They stared at each other, their faces pale. Anything, the slightest suspicion, had power to move them now, setting their hearts thumping, pulses quivering.

Bob moistened his lips, gone suddenly dry, breathing hard.

"Maybe—it ain't—nuthin'——"

But it was! As they stood—God! what was that? A cry, faint and weak, a moan, a sound, slight but definite, as if something, someone, was scratching, or trying feebly to scratch at one of the long windows of that very room!

For once in their lives both men knew the meaning of fear, stark, horrible fear, holding them paralysed, rooted to the

ground.

Only for an instant. The next Fortescue was across the intervening space, his fingers fumbling at the latch.

The window swung back, a whirl of snow and sleet

hurtled into the room, blinding him for a second.

Then it cleared, and he saw that dark bundle lying on the whitened verandah, saw, and knew that their quest was ended, for on such a night as she had disappeared Dolly Costello had come back, creeping through the darkness like a wounded animal to the only one she knew would never fail to stretch out a hand to the lost and suffering. What had he said that morning long ago? It had been her guiding starthrough all the weariness and pain of that journey. "I'll never forget this, Dolly!"

"Lights, Bob! Quick!"

What was the matter with Fortescue's voice?—hoarse,

strained, unnatural.

She was in his arms, a dead weight, her head, with its draggled curls—the only thing left of her old beauty—hanging loosely. Changed almost beyond recognition by privation and trouble was that lined face. She might be dead—certainly unconscious.

It was the work of a moment to drag the long couch before the fire, to send Ah Wing, blankly surprised and wondering, for blankets and pillows, to unfold the heavy,

snow-soaked shawl and reveal . . .

For an instant both men were struck dumb. In Dolly's arms, pressed against her breast and held there fast by a scarf, as if the powerless limbs had feared to trust to themselves alone, the tiny form of an infant boy.

"She ain't-dead?"

It was Bob's voice, shaking beyond control. Not so Fortescue's. His was perfectly steady, but curiously hard and cold—as hard and cold as the set face, with its compressed lips and steely eyes—a face to shrink from.
"No," he said quietly, "she's not dead—yet. Pull

"No," he said quietly, "she's not dead—yet. Pull yourself together, boy! Get my room ready—a fire, hot

blankets, water bottles-make it snappy."

It was the best thing for Bob—work. He was gone in an instant, and Fortescue stooped over that motionless figure, taking the cold, thin hands in his, chafing them gently, tenderly.

"Oh, Dolly! Dolly!"

The girl sighed, moaned, and relapsed into stillness again. The movement roused the brooding man into action at once. As naturally as if he had been used to such work all his life, he lifted the child from her arms, and, wrapping it in a blanket, laid it in one of the leather chairs by the fire. Then, returning to the couch, drew off the soaked, shabby jacket and skirt, the flimsy cotton blouse, noting as he did so, with eyes that momentarily grew harder and more bitter, the emaciated form that had once been so plump and pretty, replacing the wet articles with his own thick, fur-lined dressing-gown.

As he finished Bob entered, treading softly.

"All ready, boss!" he whispered, and in Fortescue's strong arms Dolly Costello was carried into the other room and laid to rest upon the bed where, eighteen months ago, Gerald Holt had slept.

"I must get the doctor," said Fortescue, as he straight-

ened up.

"You think she's bad?"

"Very!" The answer was brief, but the tone made Bob's heart sink. "I'll be as slick as I can. If she rouses, try and get a little brandy down—a teaspoonful."

"You'll have a job to get Simon a night like this."

"I'll get him," said Fortescue grimly. "Take care of her. If she comes round, make her see everything is all right." He hesitated, with darkening brow. "You'd best set Ah Wing to watch the—the child."

He went out, fighting his way through the driving sleet and snow to the stables. Marquis was swiftly saddled and mounted, inclined at first to be somewhat restive at turning out on such a night, but responding gallantly in a moment or two to his master's touch and soothing words. Conditions were bad enough, but luckily the snow was soft as yet and the wind abating. With a strange road before him, Fortescue urged his horse to the utmost, and in less time than he had expected he found himself at the doctor's door.

He was away from home, but Fortescue knew where he would most probably find him. Dr. Simon, once a clever New York physician, had only one failing—drink! Curing others, he had not been able to cure himself, and his curse had dragged him down to a barely-furnished, shabby house in a Far West town, eking out a precarious living, tending, with the remnants of his old skill, its rough inhabitants. Sober, he could be relied upon to treat any illness, perform the most intricate of operations. The trouble was, he was very seldom sober. Making his way round to the stable at the back, Fortescue saddled the doctor's horse, and, taking it and his own by the bridle, led them across the road to wherethe lights of Costello's saloon made a welcome glow, fastening them both to the post. Then, thrusting open the door, strode in.

" Is Dr. Simon here?"

The clear, hard voice rang through the well-filled room like a pistol shot, easily soaring over the murmur of talk and laughter, silencing every one present. All stared at the familiar figure in the doorway as if they saw him for the first time, surprised at his sudden appearance, bewildered by his manner, most of them conscious of a feeling of inward nervousness as those keen, hawk-like eyes swept over the throng, searching for the man he was there to find.

He was in a corner at a card-table, a stout, once-handsome man, now grey-haired and drawn, rising unsteadily

to his feet on hearing his name.

"Who wants me?" he said thickly.

"I do!" And Fortescue strode towards him resolutely.

"Whaffor?"

"Someone bad up at my place. I've your horse waiting."
"My horse? Damn your impudence, d'you think I'm

turning out a night like this?"

"I'm not thinking any—I know! Get that, and the fact I'm wasting no time, and quit arguing."

Simon sank back into his chair, attempting a laugh. "Don't be a fool, Fortescue—I'm not coming!"

"Stand up!"

The tone had changed. As the curt command was rapped out Dr. Simon found himself looking down the barrel of a deadly-looking gun held in a bronzed hand steady as a rock—and thought it wise to obey.

A murmur of protest rang through the room, subdued nevertheless, for the gun, easily covering them all, had an unhealthy look, particularly so with that face above it, ruthless and determined. Fortescue caught the sound, and again the grey eyes swept over them, blazing with angry scorn.

"Men! it's a woman, and a question of life or death! By God! if anyone gets in my way to-night I'll put a bullet through him as sure as my name is Fortescue!"

The temper of the throng changed in a moment. They were rough, but not inhuman. A woman lying near death

was a serious matter.

"Put up your gun, boss," sang out a voice from the back of the crowd. "We're with you." And Simon, finding himself in the minority, suddenly gave in.

"I'll come."

It was then that Costello, dark-browed and sullen, came

from behind the bar and struck a jarring note.

"You damned fool!" he growled to Simon. "Don't take his bluff. A woman! Likely enough it's Tommy Brennan when you get there."

"Man!" Before that awful look Costello, bold as he was, drew back, throwing up his hands as if to ward off a physical blow. "Man, it's your daughter!—dying!"
Not a sound broke the stillness. Men looked at each

other, awed and silenced. Not one 'but knew Dolly Costello, not one but had laughed and talked with the girl, many of them in the running for her favours. Dying!

Dolly Costello, little Dolly-dying!

The terrible announcement had accomplished one good thing—it had effectually sobered Dr. Simon. He had been present at Dolly's birth, had watched her grow from bonny childhood to lovely womanhood, and the shock of Fortescue's words brought out all that was best in him. It was the alert, professional man, not the drunken derelict, who spoke.

"You're sure, Fortescue?"

Recognising instantly the change in the man's attitude, Fortescue slipped back his gun.

"While there's life, Simon—" he said briefly. "Come,

every moment is precious."

They had reached the door, Fortescue's hand upon it, when that gasping, terrible cry stayed him. He stood still, hard, set face turned on the half-choking figure beside him, with its wild look and distended eyes.

" Well?"

It got out some words, almost unintelligible, the drift of which seemed to be a plea to be allowed to go with them. For an imperceptible moment Fortescue hesitated, his lips caught savagely between his teeth.

Then before his eyes rose a vision of Dolly, homeless, wandering, as he had found her, soaked to the skin. That,

at least, this man was responsible for.

The faint tinge of pity died as he looked down on him. A smile that made Costello quail before him curved the firm, set lips.

"Your own words, Costello—my door's shut! Understand? Shut!" he said, and thrust him forcibly backward.

Dr. Simon straightened up from the bed over which he had been stooping, and looked across to where Fortescue

stood waiting in the background.

The room was dimly lit and strangely quiet, save for the gasping breath from the still form lying there, and over all hung that faint, indefinable odour that always seems to haunt the room of one sick unto death.

Bob Walton, who had been sitting by the bedside on guard, had moved at the doctor's approach, and was now standing

by the windows, awaiting, like Fortescue, the verdict.

The examination was brief—a glance was sufficient. Dr. Simon, meeting the enquiring glance of both men, slowly shook his head and crept softly over to them.

"No hope," he whispered, with a slight gesture of helplessness and despair. "No possible hope! Exposure and want of nourishment, following on her weakened condition-" He broke off a moment. "Sinking

rapidly—can't think how she got here—"

Fortescue stood motionless, like a figure carven in stone. Bob glanced at him quickly, and then, treading quietly, went back to his former place, taking one of the thin hands in his as he bent over her.

There came a faint murmur. Fortescue, watching and listening, guessed the question by Bob's answer: "It's the boss."

She made a movement, a struggle, trying to raise herself.

The action roused Fortescue. He drew near, dropping on his knee by her side. The wide, blue eyes, glassy and dilated, fixed themselves upon his face, incredibly softened now and tender.

"Lift me !"

The strong arms were round her, raising her gently, Bob fixing the pillows behind her to support the feeble frame.

"You didn't mind-me-coming?"

"No, no-very glad! More than glad, Dolly! We

have never ceased to look for you-"

She smiled at that, closing her eyes. It was obvious that the slightest effort of speaking or moving was too much for her. It seemed hours to the watching men before she spoke again.

"You said-you'd never-forget-"

"I never have," Fortescue said very low. And after a moment; "Dolly, is there anyone you want—your father?"

A spasm crossed his face as he saw that quick, shrinking movement as if she had been struck. But it should never be said that John Fortescue refused to give a man a chance. He leant forward, speaking clearly.

"Dolly, he is very sorry—you understand?--very

sorry----'

The white lips moved slowly.

"Too late---"

Too late! The words rang like a knell through the quiet room. Too late the word of warning, the word of

sympathy, the helping hand.

It rang in Bob's ears—Bob, who had delayed that word of love which might have kept her pure and safe in her husband's breast. It rang in Fortescue's—Fortescue, with his life marred through knowing and loving too late!

It rang in the ears of the ruined man behind them. Aye! and it rings wherever hearts are broken and lives lost—the eternal, mournful cry; too late! too late!

The blue eyes were open again after another pause for

breath.

"My baby!"

Fortescue started violently, his eyes meeting Bob's glance across the bed. Without a word the latter rose and went out, returning in a moment with the bundle clumsily held in his unaccustomed arms. Ah Wing, at Simon's instigation, had bathed and fed it with warm bread and milk. It was placed beside her, and the frail hands fastened upon it, drawing it close, her gaze seeking Fortescue's again. He bent nearer, face very pale beneath its tan.

"My baby---"

She could not frame the words to follow, but the man guessed by the pitiful look that she knew the truth, and was troubled about the child and its future.

"What is it, Dolly? You want someone to take it-

care for it? Is that what you mean?"

"Yes, yes"—in a quick gasp, and another look of

entreaty impossible to mistake.

He closed his eyes for a moment to shut it out, fighting with himself. To care for *that* child! Was it possible? Could he bring himself to undertake the task?

He looked at her again, at the agonised suspense—and conquered his own pain and bitterness. His hand closed

over hers, firmly, reassuringly.

"God helping me, Dolly!" he said very low.

Oh, the look of dumb gratitude! The heart-rending, unspoken thanks! Hewas ashamed of his momentary hesitation.

"A-good-man-" The words came haltingly, after

a moment.

"Make him a good man? I will, Dolly!"

She smiled, and relapsed into semi-consciousness for awhile. Neither man spoke or moved during that long interval—waiting—waiting. . . .

Suddenly she opened her eyes, staring at Fortescue.

Her voice was stronger, as if the rest had done her good.

"She thought it was-you!"

"Who?" Fortescue looked bewildered, and then, with quick intuition: "Marion?"

She moved her head.

"She-she thought-I deceived her-"

"She thought you cared about me?" he said, catching at her meaning. "Is that it?"

"Yes. You will ask her-some day-to-forgive?"

He bent nearer, his hand tightening on hers.

"Dolly, was it-Gerald Holt?"

Bob drew a long breath—waiting—waiting.

Fortescue, despite his absorption, heard it, and, notwithstanding the tension of the moment, his eyesconveyed a warning, silent, imperious, and Bob took a close grip on himself.

"You—guessed? That night—that first dance——" The words were coming slowly but clearly in a last effort. "He said—his wife—she never loved him—he—was very—unhappy. He asked me to meet him that—week. I went—often—often." Her eyes never left his face. "You thought he—was alone——"

"Dolly"—it was a superhuman task to keep control

of his voice-" he knew?"

His gesture indicated the child.

She made a motion of assent; and again that long,

hissing breath came from Bob Walton.

"I was afraid—I told him—he would not—believe. I went to my aunt—the doctor——" Her voice sank, reviving after a pause. "I wrote—he sent—money—two hundred—dollars. He was gone—when—I——"

Oh, Gerald Holt—Gerald Holt! well for you that you are not present to see that face, the face of a living vengeance, as the man who had called you friend learnt

the full meaning of your hurried departure.

So, through the long night, the periods of consciousness and unconsciousness, the halting words mingling with delirium as the tired, exhausted brain went over those past months of horror and pain—months of wandering, of agony, of fruitless seeking for a means of warding off starvation, of a long, long journeying homeward, footsore, heartbroken—dying!

When dawn came it found the doctor at the foot of the bed, the two men who had loved her on either side, awaiting

the end now drawing close-so close.

Bob's head was buried in his arms, his face hidden, motionless. Fortescue's eyes never left the sunken face upon the pillow. His gaze was centred there, watchful of every flickering movement, every passing spasm.

The breathing was growing fainter now. There was no pain, no suffering at the last, just a low sinking, a gradual failing.

The eyes suddenly unclosed, wandered over the room, rested a moment on Bob's fair hair.

" Bob!"

The word was low, but surprisingly clear. He lifted his face, trying hard to still his quivering lips.

"Bob-I always meant-to say-yes-some day-

The glance left him, passed to Fortescue. "I wish—I had been—better—like——"

He knew she would have said Marion's name.

He stooped, raising her a little higher, his arm supporting her, her head against his shoulder.

She smiled her thanks, her hand seeking his blindly.

"It's growing—so—dark! Hold me—"

He gathered her close, his voice steady and calm in her ears. "I'm holding you, Dolly! Trust to me! Can you hear me? He shall be as my own son, Dolly, my own son -for your sake."

A radiant look, as if she blessed him with her dying breath. He bent his dark head, kissing the pallid lips tenderly, and, as he did so, the face changed.

She threw up both hands—a faint struggle.

"Gerald!" she said—and so died.

He laid her back gently, folding the quiet hands.

The stillness of the room was rudely broken as Bob burst into passionate weeping—great, tearing sobs that shook him from head to foot.

The older man found no relief that way. He rose to his feet, gazing down on that motionless form, a few short months ago so full of life and happiness.

He made no sound, no outcry, but, as he looked, he raised his hand on high in the manner of a man who makes a solemn oath.

"An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth—as she has suffered, so may he suffer, to the uttermost farthing—so help me, God!"

CHAPTER XXIII

WITHIN a week all that was mortal of Dolly Costello lay peacefully resting under a snowy pall near the banks of the creek, a beautiful spot, sheltered in winter-time, overhung by shady trees in the summer—a scene the girl had once been enraptured with, remembered at this last moment

by Fortescue.

The interment was of the simplest and quietest, attended by only five persons-Fortescue and Bob Walton, the Rev. Thomas Johnson, Dolly's aunt, brought post-haste from Victoria, and, lastly, Tom Costello. Fortescue relented sufficiently to allow Dr. Simon to inform the girl's father of the time and place, but by no word or look did he acknowledge his presence in their midst. The news had spread rapidly through the town, creating a sensation of no mean order, and Simon, realising the scandal that might attach to Fortescue's name over the business, took it upon himself to silence gossiping tongues by giving a simple statement of the facts to a few, knowing that they would be quick to pass it on. It said something for the respect in which John Fortescue was held that no one intruded at the last. Even the boys who had known Dolly intimately waited until later in the day to bring their small tributes.

In a voice singularly moved and full of emotion the "sky-pilot" read the simple service, and there followed a long, long moment of silence by the open grave, then, assisted by Bob, who had helped to dig it, Fortescue filled it in, making the earth into a high mount that stood up dark and bare amid the whitened landscape.

Having done all that was possible, Fortescue offered his arm to Mrs. Foster, the only one amongst them who shed

a tear, and led the way back to the house.

Of his intention as to the future not even Bob guessed. The boss had been strangely silent, broodingly thoughtful that week, and the unchanging hardness of his expression effectually stayed all enquiries.

It had been a terrible time, those few short days, with that still form lying in the house. It told on the strong nerves of both men, that and the wailing of the child who, missing its mother, would not be consoled by the nurse Simon brought up. Fortescue was thankful when Mrs. Foster arrived, to whom he instantly took a liking, and packed the nurse back to town with ample compensation.

Only five days had Mrs. Foster been with them, yet she had made her kindly presence felt in many ways. The house regained that indescribable air of homeliness it had worn when Marion Holt stayed there, for, guessing how they were feeling, and being grateful for the tenderness shown towards a sincerely loved niece, she tried to give them every additional comfort she could. That she succeeded was evident from the air of relief both men wore, the look of satisfaction when they came in to find her waiting for them both with warm, dry clothing and hot baths. Ah Wing was an excellent servant, but he had not the motherly touch that this woman had.

Perhaps that was why there was a softer light in the keen eyes turned in her direction as they sat together at the dinner-table, from which Ah Wing had just cleared away the plates and dishes, and he suddenly leant forward, arms

resting on the edge.

"Mrs. Foster," he said quietly, "I have a proposal to make to you. Can you spare a few minutes for a chat?"

"Certainly, Mr. Fortescue, as long as you wish—"

"Certainly, Mr. Fortescue, as long as you wish——"
"Shall I go?" put in Bob, half rising from his chair.

Fortescue flashed a glance at him.

"No, sit down; you're concerned in this." And Bob knew that they were to know now what the boss meant to

"You see, it's like this," Fortescue continued, turning to Mrs. Foster again. "As soon as I can put my affairs in order I'm going abroad on important business. Bob Walton, my partner here, will carry on as usual, but we have now the question of the boy to consider." It was the first time he had mentioned the child to either of them. "You know, of course, that at Dolly's request I propose to adopt him?"

"So Mr. Walton told me," murmured Mrs. Foster.

"It is very good of you."
"It was Dolly's wish," he said briefly, "and I could not refuse. I do not think her father will interfere in the arrangement, but, anyway, I had better see him about it to save trouble after. Bob and Simon are witnesses to her leaving the boy in my charge. Do you feel that I am a fit person to undertake the task, Mrs. Foster?"

You have no need to ask that, Mr. Fortescue." there was no mistaking the sincerity of her answer. only fear it will prove difficult for a man with no womenfolk about him. Have you no woman friend who would take

Fortescue shook his head.

"Even if I had, that's not my intention. I want the boy brought up on my land from birth. I want the love of it bred in him from the very beginning. He must grow to manhood, if he is spared, accustomed to all that is clean and natural, the open country, fine cattle and horses, sturdy, fearless men. There's bad blood in his veins, but I mean to see what good training will do for him, give him his chance to be what Dolly desired—'a good man' honest and straight. If I succeed, and I believe I shall, his future is assured. My own son could have no better prospects than there are in store for this child."

"And in the meantime?" put in Mrs. Foster gently.

"I'm coming to that now. In the meantime, will you take charge of him? As regards his early baby days, two men like Bob and myself are helpless, as you remark. It's a woman's job sure, and there's no one I would sooner trust him to than his mother's aunt-now I've seen her."

Mrs. Foster flushed with pleasure, feeling more than repaid for the trouble she had taken during the week.

"You mean, take him back with me?"

"Oh, no! I want you to come here. There's plenty of room. From what you have told me, you have no ties to keep you in Victoria, and you seem to like the place. Make your home here, Mrs. Foster, look after the boy, make things brighter and more comfortable for Bob while I'm away, and, believe me, you'll have no cause to regret the change. There's no work as far as housekeeping goes, except what you care to do of your own accord. Ah Wing sees to all that, and he knows where to get help if it's needed. Don't think I'm asking you to come out of kindness—it will be kindness on your part—but at the same time I want you to feel independent, regard it in the light of a business proposition, and name your own terms. What do you say?"

"I say 'yes'!" said Mrs. Foster promptly, though tears stood in her eyes. "But don't mention terms, Mr. Fortescue. If you can manage to put up with an old woman about the place I'll come gladly and look after the boy and

Mr. Walton."

"Good! We'll discuss terms later—I mean to have my own way in that. Now, Bob, are you in agreement?"

"'Tain't my place---"

"I said you were concerned in this. I propose that you be joint guardian with me over the boy. One never knows what may happen, and if by any chance I should drop out, I should know he was in safe hands. That all right?"

"Sure!" stammered Bob. "Y' know I'd do my best. I ain't goin' ter think 'bout anything else 'cept that he's Dolly's. I reckon t'ain't no use makin' the boy suffer

'cause o'---''

"He won't suffer," interjected Fortescue quietly. "He's ours now, Bob."

A wave of colour leapt into the younger man's cheek of

a sudden.

"He might have bin mine!" he said simply, but the way he said it brought a lump into the throats of the two who heard.

"Then it's settled," Fortescue continued, after a moment.

"Now I can set about my own affairs."

"Is there nothing else you want to say? No instructions?" asked Mrs. Foster, somewhat bewildered by this

hustling method of dealing with big problems.

"Instructions?" For the first time in a week he smiled. "Don't use that word, Mrs. Foster. Just care for him as you would one of your own, until he's old enough for me to take in hand."

Impulsively, moved by his frank, open friendliness, Mrs. Foster leaned across the table with hand outstretched.

"Shake!" she said earnestly. "You're a good man, Mr. Fortescue, and I'm proud to think I can give you a little help in this. If he only grows up to be like his guardian he'll leave the world a better place than he found it."

A deep flush crept under the tan on the face of the man to whom she said it. For a moment he was silent, then:

"You think too highly," he said slowly. "If, one day when I'm gone, Bob likes to tell you the whole story as he knows it—he has my permission—you'll understand that I'm not above my fellows in any way, and just now "—he laughed shortly—"I'm far removed from saintliness."

She looked at him quickly, at the eyes that had grown

suddenly like steel again, the stern jaw.

"Mr. Fortescue, what is this business you are going on? Oh, I reckon I've no right to ask, but is it—is it——"

"You're a fine guesser," he smiled back hardly. "I'm going to find that man!"

"And when you find him?" she asked breathlessly,

her heart thumping under that grim look.

"I don't know. Honestly"—he turned to Bob, who had made a sharp exclamation—"I don't know. I am only conscious that I must find him, stand face to face with him—after that, it's a blank. I've strained my eyes to see beyond it, but of the future I can read nothing. I feel that just to meet him, man to man, will suffice."

"Must you go?" she persisted gently. "It may only mean fresh trouble, more broken hearts—and you can't bring her back! Whatever you do, it can make no differ-

ence! Stay here and look after the boy."

" If I stay-"

"I go!" finished Bob, as quietly as if they were dis-

cussing a picnic.

With a start Mrs. Foster gazed from one to the other across the table. The same hardness, the same set purpose, the unalterable, ruthless determination was in both faces. Conscious of a feeling almost of panic, she rose from her chair, agitated, perplexed.

"I would not be *that* man!" she cried hurriedly. "If I had this thing on my conscience the mere sight of your

faces would kill me, I think!

"That would be too swift and easy for him," answered Fortescue steadily, and then at her quick gasp, with such fierce passion that both were awed into silence: "I would have him live to suffer the torments of the damned-to see her dead face rise before him, sleeping or wakingto be haunted day and night by the memory of her wasted youth, her cruel torture, and early grave! I would that every time he lays those white hands of his upon a keyboard he might see them stained with blood, and know himself to be a murderer! That above all the plaudits of the crowd there might ring in his ears the moans of a dying woman, the wailing of a little child! I would that every time his lips are pressed against another's he might feel the cold chill of Death freezing his hot blood! I would see him friendless, homeless, stripped of his career, ruined, dragging his weary limbs from place to place as she did! soaked to the skin, starving, broken, as she was found-

The outburst had spent itself at last. He broke off abruptly, got to his feet, that uncertain hand smoothing

back the dark hair.

"Pardon me," he said hoarsely. "I—I am forgetting my manners. You see, I'm no saint, Mrs. Foster. I couldn't answer for myself if I saw him standing before me at this moment. I'd have no more compunction in putting a bullet through him than any other loathsome creature. There—say no more! You're a woman, and it's not fitting for you to understand how men can hate!"

CHAPTER XXIV

LESS than a month later a tall, magnificently built man, clad in a thick, fur-lined overcoat, and carrying a leather suit-case, crossed the road near Charing Cross Station, and, approaching a constable, said in a pleasant but authoritative voice:

"Say, officer, direct me to a good hotel!"

The man accosted turned quickly on his heel, with the usual smart but cheerful air of the British policeman, not a little impressed as his eyes fell on the massive figure beside him.

"Hotel, sir? Certainly! Let me see, you said a good one——" His quick glance took in swiftly the indications of prosperity. "There's the Ritz in Piccadilly, the Savoy, the Carlton—that's close handy——"

"Ah, the Carlton! That has a familiar sound. How far?"

"Straight along, sir—pass Trafalgar Square—" He gave the directions clearly, and in a moment John Fortescue, for it was none other, started covering the distance in a style that made P.C. 364 open his eyes to their widest extent as he slipped the coin Fortescue had bestowed on him for the information into his pocket.

"Wonder who the deuce he is," was the man's unspoken comment, watching the tall figure disappear. "Make a fine inspector!" He fingered the half a crown with a grin. "Could do with a few more like him on my beat."

While he was speculating the man in question had reached the Carlton, and, having engaged a suite of rooms, changed his attire and went down to dinner. He had bought a newspaper on the way, and presently, his solitary meal finished, he opened it and scanned the theatre advertisements closely. Yes, there it was, the announcement he was seeking, at the head of the Palladium programme, commencing to-morrow, Monday, the 16th December: "Gerald Holt and Marion Wentworth"—Marion's name before her marriage.

With a slight frown he refolded the paper and laid it down, quite unconscious that many eyes, particularly

those of the women, were watching his movements, asking each other who he was.

"Oh, mamma!" The whisper came from a dainty, brown-haired girl a few tables away. "Do look at that man over there in the corner. Did you ever see anyone so handsome?"

Mamma obeyed, taking careful stock of the clean-cut features and fine form, faintly alarmed at the note of enthusiasm in her daughter's voice, but even she had to admit the remark was justified.

"Very handsome," she agreed. "Looks like a wealthy American, yet there's something wholly British about him. But what a hard face!" She gave a slight shiver.

"It almost repels one."

The whole striking change simply explained—the face that had once inspired all who saw it with a sense of open friendliness and cheery good nature now called up a feeling of inward shrinking and faint nervousness, intensified whenever the steely grey eyes flashed over the observer.

Unaware and indifferent to the curiosity of those about him, Fortescue lit a cigarette and left the table, and, donning his thick overcoat, for the night was cold, strolled out into the street, his manner obviously that of a man

undecided as to his next move.

Halting under a street-lamp, he pulled out his wallet, and, extracting a letter, read the address at the top of the page slowly, thoughtfully, then, as if the words had power to make up his mind, he looked round, hailing a taxi-cab that was crawling by at a snail's pace.

"Where to, sir?"

"Parkhurst Road, Belsize Park—No. 36 Anson Mansions. Do you know it?"

"Quite all right, sir."

What were his thoughts as the cab bowled along the smooth roads? Impossible to tell from his set expression, for not a muscle of his face moved, and the outward calm easily covered the man's inner feelings. Yet underneath was a seething tumult. The mere fact that in a few minutes he might be gazing once more on Marion's face was enough, without the errand he was bound on, to fire his blood with

madness. The thought of meeting Holt, the cause behind the meeting, the memories behind and the uncertain future before, was setting his pulses throbbing wildly. It had been his original intention to leave the matter until the next day, but he had not been able to resist the impulse to act instantly. He could not see his way clear; he was simply letting his passion drive him as it would. He only knew he must go, at once!

The cab suddenly pulled up. He got out, paid the man, adding a good tip to his legitimate fare, and crossed the payement, staring up at the huge block of residential flats

before him.

Without a moment's hesitation he entered the wideopen door, finding himself in a large, square entrance hall lit by electric light, with a door on either side. He looked at the numbers—36 on one side, 36A on the other. Marion's letter had plainly stated 36, and he turned to it. Only then, with the door right before him, he paused, and, strong man though he was, closed his eyes to shut it out, his face gone strangely pale. For a brief second only—the next moment his fingers were on the bell, pressing it steadily.

No answer. He rang again, and yet again. Still no reply. A sound behind him made him glance swiftly round, to confront a short, stout man regarding him from the doorway of No. 36A, who smiled broadly on encountering Fortescue's eyes, stepping out into the hall.

"I'm afraid it's no use ringing," he said pleasantly.

"I believe the Holts are out of town."

Out of town! He little guessed from the quiet reply the blow he had dealt the other man.

"I'm greatly obliged to you."

"Oh, don't mention it. Was your business urgent? I think they are due back to-morrow—they must be, as they open at the Palladium in the evening. If you like to wait a moment I'll ask my wife, she's very friendly with Mrs. Holt. Come inside."

Fortescue followed him through a small hall into a brightly lit sitting-room, where a pretty, fairly young woman sat by a cheerful fire reading to two children, a boy and girl about ten and seven years of age respectively.

She rose from her chair as the stranger entered, giving her husband a quick, enquiring glance.

"Daisy, this gentleman is trying to find the Holts.

When will they be back?"

To his surprise, she stared a moment at the newcomer, and then suddenly stepped forward with outstretched

hand, her face expressive of pleasurable surprise.

"Why, I can guess who this is," she exclaimed, smiling. "You must be Mr. Fortescue from Canada—I couldn't mistake Marion's description. Please sit down and make yourself at home for a few minutes. How pleased they will be to see you! Why, Charlie, I told you all about it. You see "—turning to the visitor again—"they had a special engagement for to-day at Birmingham; and I expect they'll just get back in time to go straight to the Palladium to-morrow night. Perhaps you could go to the show and surprise them."

"Sure, I could do that," Fortescue agreed, with an inward, grim smile as he thought of the surprise in store for Holt. "Anyway, I'm obliged to you for your help." He had seated himself on the chair she had pulled forward, feeling that he had fallen among friends, so genial was the manner of both. "Perhaps you can tell me if sh—they

are well?"

"Yes, I think so." There was some slight hesitation over Daisy Morton's reply, and Fortescue, though apparently paying no marked attention, was fully aware of the quick glance between husband and wife. "Marion is a little nervy, and has been complaining lately of bad headaches, but then her work is rather trying—oh, nothing serious," she added hastily, catching the look he was unable to repress.

"I'm real glad to hear it." He rose from his seat, picking up his hat. "I mustn't detain you any longer

from your reading-"

"Don't worry about that!" Charlie Morton laughed.

"It's only to the kiddies."

Fortescue's face softened as his eyes rested on the children standing close to their mother's skirt, and began to fumble in his pocket.

"Do they like candies?" he asked smiling. He motioned to them to come near, and, stooping, slipped a shining coin into each shyly extended hand, finding his first bit of pleasure since he landed in their delighted faces, and, standing a moment or two longer, asked them what they meant to buy, and, upon them showing him the big picture-book, told them which animals he had on his ranch, finding genuine amusement in their round-eyed wonder and eager questions.

In his absorption he failed to notice that Mrs. Morton had left the room during the conversation, but as he turned, after kissing the children good-bye, to shake hands with the older people, he saw her at the moment re-entering,

holding in her arms an infant.

"You haven't seen all our family," she said, with a happy blush. "Our youngest boy, just six months old,

Mr. Fortescue."

Glancing up at him as she said it, she gave a startled exclamation, the smile suddenly driven from her face. He was standing rigidly motionless, his gaze riveted on the tiny form, and ghastly pale, as if he was looking on some ghost of the past. When she spoke quickly in her alarm, asking if he felt ill—tired—he lifted his head.

"No, no! I beg your pardon—seeing the child reminded

me of-of a painful story."

With an effort of will he forced the recollection away and held out his hand. "Thank you once more for your kindness. I hope we shall meet again before I return to Canada."

They little knew how soon they were to meet, and under

what awful circumstances.

"Fancy seeing John Fortescue in the flesh after hearing so much about him!" Charlie Morton exclaimed, as he returned from showing their unexpected visitor out. "And what a fine fellow!"

There were tears in Daisy Morton's eyes as she looked at

her husband.

"I can't help wondering what the story was," she said, hushing the child, who had begun to whimper. "It must have been something terribly tragic, for oh, Charlie, that man's face is the saddest I have ever seen!"

CHAPTER XXV

THE following evening John Fortescue entered a box at the Palladium Theatre and seated himself a little in the background, his eyes taking a quick survey of the house.

A troupe of dancers occupied the stage, and, being talented and graceful, were winning a full round of applause, but their art held no charm for the lonely figure that had just arrived. Instead, he turned his attention to the programme he had obtained, searching for the one name that never failed to stir him.

He found it in the sixth item, in large type: "GERALD HOLT, composer and pianist, assisted by MARION WENT-WORTH, mezzo-soprano, in selections from his own compositions," followed by a long list of pianoforte soli and songs.

The curtain descended to the accompaniment of rousing handclaps, the numbers changed from four to three, and, again consulting the paper in his hand, Fortescue saw it referred to a well-known ventriloquist, who was soon delighting the house into shrieks of laughter with his sallies. Highly amusing he might be, yet he failed utterly to bring a smile to one man's lips that night. The silent listener was only conscious of a growing sense of irritation, an almost uncontrollable desire to hurl something at the unoffending artiste.

The next act, however, received closer attention and some show of interest, for the curtain rose on Marie Courtice, and Fortescue recognised in the name the woman Marion

had spoken of so often as her best friend.

He literally gasped as she appeared. This fat, vulgar woman, overdressed and yet decidedly underdressed, with her loud, unmusical voice, heavily made-up face, and obviously dyed hair, Marion's friend? Impossible!

As she twisted and paraded in her gorgeous gown his eyes watched her with marked disfavour; as the suggestive quips left her lips winced sharply like a man stung. was some mistake! This woman could have nothing in common with Marion Holt.

He resented the roar of laughter that greeted each broad

remark, was hotly disgusted noting the effect every gesture had on the audience. Was it possible the vast crowd

enjoyed this sort of enjoyment?

He sat back frowning, longing for the numbers to record a change, but Marie was a popular turn, and he was forced to listen to three more songs, during which he received some edifying information on how to manage refractory husbands, get a divorce, and "carry on" with the lodger!

Another time he might have seen the humour of the thing and taken it lightly, but to-night he was out of tune with it all, nerves on edge, and, instead of affording some amusement, the coarseness further embittered him against Holt, who had taken his wife among such women as this.

The curtain fell at last; the numbers changed. Number seven! God! how much longer? Unable to control his impatience, he went out, took a stroll to the bar, lingering over his drink as long as possible, returning to his seat as the orchestra finished playing a selection.

He sat down wearily, carelessly glancing at the plates-

and the mad blood rushed to his face—number six!

The house was very quiet, very still, the stage shrouded from view. He tried to imagine what was going on behind the curtain, and failed, from a confusion of thought. Like one in a dream he noticed the conductor's movements, the turning of the music, the laughing face of a first violinist whispering some joke to his neighbour.

A rap of the baton, an instant's pause before they started to play something soft and delicate, dreamy, merging into little trickling notes, sweet piping chords. Where had he heard those sounds, as if all the birds were breaking into song?

He was standing again at the garden gate in the cool of the night—listening, listening—with his eyes fixed on the windows of the lamp-lit sitting-room—no, fool! fool!—he was here, in the crowded theatre, this was London—London—and those rippling notes, rising louder as the orchestra gradually died away, were coming from behind the curtain.

With silent ease it rose upon a darkened stage, but as the music continued a long shaft of light shone out—and he saw Gerald Holt seated before a grand piano, head thrown back, white hands flashing over the keys, as he had seen

him many times before—and rose from his chair with a stifled cry, his hand flying round to his hip. Then he remembered, and fell back, his head buried in his hands,

fighting for calmness, for self-control.

His passion must not prove his master. He must be steady, firm, clear-thinking. How could he deal with this man if he lost his head? He must remember this was no personal matter. He must not think of Marion. There was always the danger of judging unjustly because this man was her husband. There must be no animosity on that account. It was for Dolly—Dolly—that he was here—and for Dolly's child.

A thunder of applause drew his eyes to the stage. Gerald, seated, was bowing slightly in response, with the air of one who fully realises he is only receiving his due. As Fortescue watched him, breathing heavily, the white hands returned to the keys and he began to play once more, the beam of light merging into a general brightness that lit the other details of the scene—the back and sides hung with black velvet curtains, on the left the fine piano, and, carelessly arranged on an Oriental carpet, a cushioned settee, a couple of finely wrought chairs, a carved stand holding a lamp—it might have been a dainty drawing-room.

How well he played! What exquisite sounds he was drawing forth! A master musician on an incomparable instrument. Strange that such a superb gift should occupy so base a form, outwardly so distinguished, with its small but well-shaped head. The distance discreetly veiled the too-thin lips, with their peevish droop, the sneering lines about the nose—covered also the short, quick breathing, the heated flush, and the little beads of moisture breaking out on the smooth forehead with the effort that had once been of no account, but which now was daily growing harder to battle against.

A moment's pause, a change of rhythm and tone, before that voice rang out, thrilling with passion and power.

What she sang Fortescue never knew. He sat motionless, bending slightly forward, eyes fastened on those velvet curtains. They swayed as at the touch of an unseen hand—parted—and Marion came through, walking to the centre of the stage, singing the last bars of her song.

If Marie Courtice had been the personification of vulgarity, Marion Holt must surely stand for exquisite refinement seen thus in her delicate silver and black gown, her only ornament a long rope of pearls, and holding a wonderful fan of flame-tinted feathers.

The last notes died away. She stood smiling, acknowledging the storm of applause, swaying the fan gracefully to and fro, unaware of the hungry gaze bent on her face. She sang again and yet again. Though Holt was deservedly popular, and received his due share of praise, it was Marion the people wanted. The gracious personality won them in greater measure than did her husband's genius.

But they had to be satisfied eventually. Fortescue's last sight of her came with Holt leading her before the dropped curtain, of both standing a moment to bow

repeatedly to the thunderous outburst.

They were gone, and, unable to contain himself longer, Fortescue rose and made his way to the street, drawing in great draughts of the crisp, cold air. Used to wide, open spaces and wind-swept prairie, the heat and oppressiveness of the closed-in theatre, coupled with his strong emotion, had made him feel faint and overcome.

He stood a few minutes on the pavement to adjust his coat, reviving instantly in the keen atmosphere, and, while doing so, his attention became attracted to a dark red car with a black hood that passed him and pulled up at the stage door.

That Gerald had given Marion a car he was quite ignorant of. The sight of it waiting simply told him that someone among the artistes was leaving shortly, and, with the hope that it might be her, he drew back, watching intently.

He had some time to wait before the door swung open and Marion, followed by her husband, stepped out into the street. He caught a glimpse of a pale, unsmiling profile above the white fur collar of her cloak as Gerald assisted her in, entering quickly himself, then the car shot forward and he was left staring dumbly after it.

But with its disappearance he seemed to recover his normal bearing. Striding swiftly down the road, he found a taxi, and was soon bowling in the direction of Parkhurst Road for the second time since his arrival in England.

He had no fear of not finding him to-night. There was no escape for Gerald Holt—it was to be face to face now. He wondered grimly if any presentiment of coming trouble disturbed the other man as he travelled homeward, excited, jubilant over his great reception. He little guessed that to Holt the sin was a ghastly nightmare that refused to be shaken off, haunting him persistently. Who can say why? He had ruined others and gone his way unmoved. Why should the betrayal of this one young girl mean more than all the rest? Was it because she was so young, so innocent, so trusting? Or was the solemn curse by her death-bed bearing fruit?

Reaching his destination, Fortescue entered the doorway of Anson Mansions, finding himself once more before No. 36 flat. Without a moment's hesitation he went forward, hand outstretched, but before he could press the bell the door opened and a girl, plainly dressed in a dark frock and neat apron, stood in front of him. She gave a startled exclamation at being confronted by a stranger, but something in his appearance seemed to reassure her, for she

smiled immediately, saying:

"Were you going to ring?"
"Sure!" returned Fortescue. "This is Mr. Holt's flat?"

"Yes, sir. Did you want to see Mr. Holt?"

"That is why I am calling; I want to see Mr. and Mrs. Holt."

The girl looked doubtful, at the same time eyeing him with a slightly puzzled expression, as if she had some idea she knew him.

"I don't think they will see you to-night, sir; it's very

late. Can you leave it until the morning?"

"I could, but I'd rather see him now I'm here. I'm an old friend; Mr. Fortescue from Canada——"

She interrupted his explanation with a cry of surprise,

her face flushing.

"Oh, I've been trying to think who you were! How pleased they will be! I'll tell them at once; I'm sure they wouldn't like it if you went away again."

She turned to run in, but Fortescue caught her by the arm.

"Are you Mrs. Holt's maid, Ellen, that she told me

"Yes, sir"—with a deepening of the pleased smile—"I'm Ellen—"

"Well, Ellen, what do you say to giving them a little surprise? Don't tell them-just let me walk in without

saving a word-

He smiled, and any scruples the girl had vanished under the charm of it. Who could resist the appeal of the grey eyes bent on her face? Certainly not Ellen, who had secretly worshipped before his photograph in the sittingroom for months.

"If-if you think it will be all right, sir," she faltered. "I wouldn't like Mrs. Holt to be cross with me---"

"I give you my word she won't. Where are you off

to now?"

"Only to Mrs. Morton's opposite with a message. I'll be back in a minute. Go straight in. I left Mr. Holt in the sitting-room. He will be pleased!"

"Here"-something rustling was pressed into her hand

-" buy yourself some candies in the morning."

"Oh, Mr. Fortescue!" "There, run along-"

Blushing with delight, the girl sped away on her errand, enraptured still further of this man she had heard so much of, and, left alone, Fortescue braced his shoulders, pushed open the door, and entered.

He stood in a small hall with a door on either side, both closed. Guessing the one on the right led to the sittingroom, and hearing no sound, he turned the handle and

looked in.

It was unoccupied, but well-lit. He walked slowly forward, footsteps unheard on the thick carpet, his keen glance noting the principal features of the room, essentially Marion's in its tasteful effect, realising as he advanced farther that she had obviously endeavoured to arrange every detail in similar fashion to another sitting-room away in Canada. His heart thumped as he looked round. The old memories were not forgotten then; she still thought of her distant friends. He had almost feared, seeing her apparently happy on the stage, that the remembrance

of those past days was growing dim.

A sound caught his quick ear. He swung round sharply, to face a door leading into another room, which stood slightly ajar. It was the sound of someone moving about, then a drawer closed with a snap, a chair pushed away, followed by a few words uttered wearily by a voice he knew only too well—Marion's.

"Why don't you go and have your supper, Gerald?"

"I don't want any!"

Fortescue started at the tone, thick and sullen. He had heard it sullen often enough, but never thick and unsteady as now. He stood still, listening unashamedly. It had been his object to take Holt unawares, gauge his present conduct by the way he would find him.

"Why not? You always do have supper. I expect

Ellen has it ready——'

"Damn Ellen!"

"Gerald!" Fortescue could imagine her expression, and his lips tightened. "Please moderate your language if you can. This isn't a public-house bar!"

"Worse luck! It might be more cheerful if it was---"

"I've no doubt you would feel more at home in one, and no doubt sweeter-tempered in consequence. You are getting unbearable, Gerald."

"Whose fault is that?"

"Not mine! Though you continually tell me so. But I warn you I cannot stand the strain of both my work and you much longer. To-night I was too unnerved by your ridiculous outburst in the dressing-room to appear when I should have done, and you had to play again. What do you think the end will be if you continue this kind of life?"

"You know how to alter it!"

"I wonder you dare breathe the suggestion in your present condition. Your conduct of late has only served to fill me with the utmost contempt and loathing!"

"I don't care a hang what you feel! I'm past caring! I've stayed myself until now for fear of your scorn, but when you still drum it into me that you hate me I see no reason to respect your wishes."

"What-what do you mean?"

No mistaking the hint of alarm in the halting words, the quick gasp. The face of the man behind the door darkened

ominously, but he stood still, motionless.

"I mean there's going to be an end of your disdain—now!—to-night! Do you hear? I'm your husband. And it's going to be no empty title in future. I'm going to claim my rights. Understand?"

"If you can! Do you think I would allow you to touch me at any time, least of all as you are now, sodden with drink?"

"Allow!"—with a rough laugh. "It won't be a question of allowing!"

A sound as if he had moved towards her, and her voice again, quick and agitated.

"If you dare to lay a hand on me, Gerald, I will throw

myself on Mrs. Morton's protection!"

"As if I shall let you leave this room! No, you're mine at last! It's no good struggling, you little vixen, you can't get away——"

"Let me go! Gerald, you're hurting me!"

"Am I? I mean to! Do you know what I'd like to do? I'd like to beat you down to the very dust, crush all that obstinate spirit that has defied me so long out of you! How do my kisses feel after Fortescue's, eh? Did you fight him like this when he held you in his arms?"

Look behind you, Gerald Holt! No, don't look—those

eves will shrivel your miserable soul if you do.

He was standing in the doorway, drawn as to a magnet at mention of his name, gazing hardly on the scene before him: Marion, half-disrobed, held prisoner between her husband's breast and the dressing-table, her white, despairing face thrown back in an endeavour to avoid the hot rain of kisses falling on her throat and mouth, weak hands trying to thrust him back. In his passion he had the strength of a madman.

"You've played fast and loose with me long enough now it's my turn! I let you go once before, but you won't find me such a fool to-night. It's no good crying

out! Who do you suppose will hear you?"

" I will!"

The words rang out like a pistol shot.

"Eh?" He started, looked round, releasing his wife as he staggered back with a horrible scream. "God! Fortescue!"

It was the fearful cry of the man who suddenly finds himself caught like a rat in a trap, a very different cry from that low, sobbing: "John! John!" uttered by Marion.

As her husband cowered away she ran forward, glad relief in every line of her face, in the tone of her voice, forgetful of all else save that a miracle had happened and the beloved figure stood there ready to help. But before she quite reached him she stopped abruptly, one hand creeping up to her mouth as if she would use it to choke back an outburst of terror.

"John-John!-what is it? Why do you look like

that? What is the matter?"

His eyes passed over her as if he saw her not, passed her and fastened on that crouching figure by the dressing-table, eyes holding something so terrible in their depths that again she started forward.

"No, no, John. He has been ill-remember-for my

sake, John!'

He put her aside with one hand, easily.

"Keep out of this, Marion; my business is with your husband. Gerald Holt"—the words rang out harshly—

"I have something to say to you."

The miserable creature raised his face, pitifully haggard now, and drawn. How many would have recognised the popular artiste of an hour ago in this shaking, terrified, agonised thing?

"Not here. Fortescue, for God's sake, not here!

Spare me before Marion!'

"Spare you!" And again Marion started forward with an imploring gesture at the awful tone. "As much as you have spared others! Your wife is the only one to be considered.

Get into the next room! I'll deal with you there."

Gerald never doubted the reason behind Fortescue's unexpected appearance. He knew only too well. He had been living in hourly dread of retribution for his sin, the far-reaching effect of which he had yet to learn—and it was here!

But to keep Marion still in ignorance, make a last appeal to Fortescue, was the one thought in his confused brain, and at the command he stumbled towards the sitting-room, ready to go anywhere, do anything, rather than the words should be spoken before her.

Like one half stunned, Marion saw him going, but as he reached the doorway, with Fortescue close on his heels,

she recovered her senses and sprang after them.

"John! Gerald! Don't shut me out! John!" Her hands clutched at him, holding him with the strength of desperation. "He has been ill—you hear?—ill—very ill. He must not have any excitement, any shocks—oh, you don't understand. John, leave us—forget it all——"

Without a word he lifted her quietly, carried her back into the room, put her into a basket chair, turning swiftly

away. But she was up in a moment.

" John!"

Only the wooden door in front of her, the sound of the key turned on the inner side, and she sank to the floor, sobbing wildly.

"John, John, for God's sake have pity! You will kill him! That awful look!—oh, what shall I do—what

shall I do?"

A frenzy of despair seized her, despair and horrible fear. She knelt on the floor, head pressed against the wood, trying to see through the keyhole, but the aperture was small, blocking her view. Stifling her sobs, she listened breathlessly. What were they saying—doing?

She could only hear a low murmur, Fortescue's voice speaking rapidly, fiercely, hammering the words home. If she could but catch them! What was that? Rising above the sound of his voice, a wailing cry: "No, no, no,

don't say it!"

She sprang up, beating on the door with her clenched hands.

"John! John! Let me out, please!"

No answer. She listened again. Oh, God! what was he saying? If she could only hear! And then something that turned her blood to ice, paralysing her limbs so that she stood like a figure of stone—a dreadful shriek echoing

over the whole building, a thud, and the sound of quick movements, a door opening and shutting with a bang, a woman's voice—Ellen's—terrified and shrill, a sharp command breaking in on it, and again the sound of hurrying feet and banging doors-

Then everything went dark, and she knew no more. The stupor, it could hardly be called a swoon, lasted some time, but she opened her eyes on the same room, to find

herself leaning for support against the same wall.

The period of oblivion, however, had seemingly cleared her brain a moment. Quite suddenly a fact came to her which she had forgotten in her distraction and panic, namely, the existence of another key that fitted this very lock. She flew to a drawer in the dressing-table, dragged it out, throwing the silk and lace garments on to the floor like so many rags, found the key, and snatched it up. Instantly she was back again at the door, panting with her haste, thrusting it into the lock and turning it sharply.

"What-what are you all doing here?"

She was standing very quietly just inside the room, one hand upraised to her breast, a slightly puzzled frown on her forehead, looking-looking at that still form on the couch with the doctor kneeling beside it, at Mr. Morton, in his pyjamas, standing close by, and Fortescue, grey to the lips, but calm and composed, stooping over Ellen, who sat sobbing bitterly in a chair.

The sudden opening of the door startled them all. They looked up; and a silence fell on them at sight of the woman standing there, broken by the doctor's slight movement as he rose to his feet. No one answered the question she put, no one could find a word to say. They stared at her dumbly, held motionless by something strange in her

appearance.

The frown deepened. She took a step nearer.
"What is the matter? What are you all doing? Why

are you here?" she demanded.

"Poor girl! Poor girl!" muttered the doctor. He looked across at Fortescue. "Go carefully," he said warningly, and touched his forehead. "Recent nerveshock-strain-"

Fortescue needed no prompting. Grasping the doctor's meaning, he was himself again instantly, going towards her with outstretched hands.

"Marion, come to me!" he said very low. "Don't look that way—look at me! Let me tell you——"

She pushed him away, staring past him—to the couch.

"What is Gerald lying there for? Why is the doctor here and Mr. Morton?"

"Marion, don't look over there; look at me! You know me, don't you? You remember John Fortescue-" Oh, if only these strangers were not present! He felt helpless, baffled, unable to reach her. He dared not say anything that might harm her good name, attach any "Let me take you into significance to this awful scene. the next room—tell you quietly—"

She turned her eyes on him in a strange glance that sent

a cold chill down his spine.

The doctor saw it also, and a sharp exclamation broke from his lips. He knew better than anyone else present the low nervous condition she had been in for some time, and was prepared for nothing short of a breakdown. He was much more concerned over the living woman than the dead man on the couch. Fortescue caught the smothered sound, and turned to the other man.

"You tell her!" he said hoarsely. "I can't! I

can't!"—his courage suddenly failing.

As he drew back the doctor, more used to such a task,

took his place, laying a kindly hand on Marion's arm.
"My poor girl," he said very gently. "Do you understand what has happened? You know he was in a bad state—he had a shock—a great surprise. It was too much for him-" He waited, but she made no movement. "Your husband is-dead!"

"Dead." She repeated the word after him, slowly, once, twice. "Dead! How strange-" Her eyes left him, wandered to the couch as if it held some fascination for her. Quite quietly she walked forward to go to it.

"Doctor"-it was Fortescue crying out-"don't let

her go. Marion I"

She made no indication that she heard. She reached

the couch, and stood with clasped hands, staring down on the white face, freed from all lines of care, unmarred in death by the fierce passions that had consumed him in life.

Fortescue would have gone to her then, taken her away

by force if necessary, but the doctor interposed.

"Don't worry her! Let her be. Her grief may take a natural course if she looks at him, gradually comes to realise it. I'll speak to her—"

He went close, took her by the arm again, speaking with

quiet steadiness.

"My dear, you understand, don't you? Turn your face to me a moment."

She turned it obediently, lifting her eyes to his.

"That's better! You understand now? You know what has happened?"

"Yes—I understand——" The tone was clear, but mechanically calm. "He's dead—quite, quite dead."

"And you'll try to be brave?"

She smiled, a curious smile, childish, meaningless, disturbing the man beside her as much as the strange glance had done. With narrowed eyes he regarded her with added intentness, while the others watched, holding their breath.

"Could you bear for me to tell you how it happened?" he asked her. "It was very sudden. We kept you away as long as we could. He—"

"For God's sake, man!"
The doctor turned his head.

"Leave her to me!" he said sharply. "This calmness is the worst thing possible in her highly strung condition. I won't answer for the consequences if we fail to rouse her. Now, my dear, shall I tell you?"

"I know!" she answered, with a little nod of the head like an over-cute youngster who has fathomed a secret.

"He killed him?"

"Killed him!" The doctor's voice was startled for the moment. "Who?" And his eyes flashed to Fortescue, who had stepped back with ashen face under the unexpected blow. "Who killed him?"

She looked at him vaguely, still smiling.

"A man," she said dreamily. "A man who came hereone night—I forget—" She put a hand to her head as if it pained her. "He frightened me so! He had such a dreadful face—" She shuddered, looked up into the kindly one beside her, and smiled again. "I-I thought at first I knew him, but it was a mistake-a mistake. Wasn't it funny he should die-like that? I-I often wished he would!" Her lips twitched ominously, the slender shoulders beginning to shake. "I often wished he was dead—and—and—" She broke suddenly into a peal of laughter, laughter that echoed horribly through the room—unnatural, uncontrollable, mirthless laughter increasing in strength until the whole place seemed full of it. The doctor turned swiftly to his case, bringing out a small phial of some liquid drug, which he began to pour into a glass.

It was destined to remain untouched, for Fortescue, unable to endure the sight of that swaying figure racked by mad hysteria, himself tortured by the knowledge that he was responsible for it all, went swiftly forward and

gripped her by the arms.
"Marion!" he said harshly. "Marion, stop laughing! Do you hear me?" He held her tightly, forcing her to look up, face set hard with the determination to check her.

"Be quiet-stop laughing at once!"

She gazed vaguely into his face. It held something, in its forced sternness, of the expression it had worn not more than an hour ago, a slight touch, but enough. To his unspeakable horror, the blank glance rested on him, changed slowly to one of utter terror, awful fear, a look he never forgot.

Quite suddenly she wrenched away from his hold, crouching back with dilated eyes, her shaking hand outflung,

pointing.

"The man! The man with the dreadful face! look!"—and so, screaming, fell to the ground.

CHAPTER XXVI

Sudden death of well-known composer!

Unexpected end of popular pianist!

Sensational news for the early-morning placards—made more startling and arresting by the awful tone the newsboys,

anxious to sell their piles of papers, infused into it.

"'Ere y'are, sir! Chronicle—Sketch—all the latest pictures! 'Nother star gawn, sir! Blimey, Bill'—this to a pal standing near—"dunno what'll 'appen ter the 'alls if this 'ere sort o' thing goes on. . . . Wot's that you say? 'Ow'd it 'appen? Well, seems like 'e 'ad a groggy 'art, an' w'en 'ees ole pal turns up from Canada 'e got so blinkin' excited 'e just went off pop!—clean as a whistle! Yus, only playin' at the Pall. lars' night. Ain't yer 'eard 'im? Lumme! you don't arf see life—I don't fink!"

Thus was the unlooked-for event whereby the musichall patrons lost an idol and the musical world a great

exponent, easily summed up.

There was no question of scandal, no shadow of doubt as to the cause of it. He was known to suffer from an incurable form of heart disease, and for months past had been receiving attention from his medical man, who gave a certificate in accordance with the complaint, so that there was no necessity for an inquest. The story, related by Ellen, of Fortescue's arrival, soon got round, and his name was naturally freely mentioned in connection with the affair, not in condemnation, but with much sympathy, as "the poor devil whose unexpected visit unfortunately caused his friend's death—awful thing, don't you know—wouldn't like to have it on my conscience, etc.—no doubt thought he was giving him a pleasant surprise—"

Apart from the loss of his genius, none were unduly stricken over Gerald Holt's premature end. As those who knew him were heard to remark, he was a bit of a "goer"—went the pace—not the sort of chap one cared much about—always seemed a selfish, irritable beggar, and so darned high and mighty at times. Surprising to hear that his

wife was down with brain-fever. Of course, no doubt it was a terrible shock, but anyone remembering certain rumours concerning other women would be surely justified in imagining she might feel relieved to be rid of him. So the circle who had known him discussed and conjectured at leisure. It had little effect on the few who were waging a stern fight at No. 36 Anson Mansions, for Marion Holt lay tossing on her bed in the throes of delirious fever, and all other matters were forgotten in the awful uncertainty as to which way the scales would turn.

Suffering as he had never suffered in his life, Fortescue kept vigil in the sitting-room. Though he would have given all he possessed to be there, he was barred from her side, kept out by the doctor's warning that the sight of him might undo all the careful nursing she was receiving from Mrs. Morton and Ellen, devoted helpers both in this

time of stress.

The sight of him! It had come to that! The mere sight of his face—the face of the man who loved her with all the strength of which he was capable—might be sufficient to cause her death!

It was the hardest blow of all, yet he would not allow his mind to dwell upon it. He told himself insistently that when she was better the old feeling would be reestablished; when the brain now clouded regained its

normal tone she would understand.

He lived on that one thought through the weeks that followed, weeks in which he strove to keep himself occupied. He took all business matters on his shoulders, interviewed pressmen, relatives, friends with unerring judgment and calm resource. Never once did he reveal by the slightest slip the untoward circumstances, never once did he betray a passing spasm of horror at what had occurred. If others thought him unnaturally controlled, it was put down to the hardness of the West, where human life was held more lightly. Nor was the resolute firmness assumed. He was not conscious of the least regret, nay, rather filled with a sense of fierce satisfaction that Holt had learnt before he died of the havoc he had wrought.

One vision was ever present with him, blotting out the

recollection of Gerald's panic-stricken face—the remembrance of Dolly, brutally betrayed, callously left.

Only one thing he would have altered—wished—for Marion's sake, it had happened elsewhere, so that she

might have been spared the worst of the shock.

Knowing the cause that had driven him to such extreme measures, he had no fear how she would judge him. She trusted and loved him so well, had loved little Dolly even as he had, and he could safely build on the overwhelming passion of anger that would beset her when she heard the truth. He could afford to wait, for when her love was put to the test it would not be found wanting, and not only her love, but also her sense of justice. What woman could listen to the story and not feel that such a man was better dead? Oh, he had no fear—no fear!

At last the great day came when he learnt she was to get up for the first time. It meant he must be banished to the hotel, but, compared to the joy of hearing she was so much recovered, that was a minor consideration.

He waited a few days, and then called on the doctor to ascertain how soon he might visit her, but, though sympathetic, the physician would not risk further injury to his patient, insisting that at least another week must elapse before he presented himself to her.

That week tried even John Fortescue's iron endurance and patience, but, kept in touch with the flat by telephone, the time passed more quickly than he had anticipated.

Possibly, hearing of the rapid improvement in Marion Holt's condition, his nerves were steadier and his mind sufficiently relieved to take an interest in outside affairs.

A favourite haunt of his in the evenings was the Palladium—not the theatre itself, that he never wished to enter again, but Marie Courtice's dressing-room, where he could always hear the latest news from Anson Mansions.

He learnt from Marie, good old Marie, whose worth he had soon begun to appreciate, that Marion had been out walking on several occasions, and, reassured by this piece of information, he rushed round to the doctor's house the moment the week was up to get him to sanction his visit.

Yes, the doctor agreed to the request, betraying no

effusion certainly, but giving his consent without hesitation, which was all Fortescue asked of him, making only one stipulation, to the effect that he must write her first to avoid another shock, and which, after a little reluctance. Fortescue agreed to do. After all, as he had managed to wait a week, he supposed he could exist a day or so longer for her sake, until she bade him come.

It was something of a task, the sending of that letter. He curbed the impulse to write in a lover-like strain, and took refuge in brief formality, merely a request to be allowed to spend an hour with her now that she was recovered from her illness, holding himself entirely at her service for whatever day she cared to name. Only at the end the heart-felt longing betrayed itself in one short, crisp sentence: "These weeks have sure been hell, Marion!"

Unlike the majority of men, Fortescue did not expect an immediate reply. Knowing the confused state of mind she must be in, he reckoned on a little delay, on her needing a short time, perhaps a day or two, for consideration and for collecting her thoughts. It was the old John Fortescue, generous and infinitely tender, overflowing with the milk of human kindness, who waited at the Carlton for the answer that would make him the happiest man in the world. He even took into account the fact that she might not write at all. Maybe Ellen would ring through, or Mrs. Morton. Or would he have the supreme joy of once more hearing her voice, the only voice that had power to set his pulses throbbing, saying: "John, come!"

Oh, he had no fears, no doubts, now she had regained her health and strength. She loved and understood him so well.

Another day slipped by, and yet another. He rose early the next morning, the morning of the tenth day following his interview with the doctor, sure that the message was due to arrive at any moment. There was a whistle of gladness on his lips, the first for many months, as he plunged into his bath, and plans innumerable rushed through his mind in the course of dressing and going down to breakfast.

No letter in his batch of correspondence bearing the familiar handwriting. A set-back, certainly, but not a serious one. She would send it by hand, or 'phone, that

was sure. He must hear to-day. Something was telling

him insistently that he would hear to-day.

Finishing his meal, he entered the sitting-room of his suite, tried to read the morning paper, but failed to concentrate on it sufficiently to understand a word. He picked up a new book, and laid it down again unopened. Should he go for a stroll? No, better not. He must be on the spot—any minute now—any minute.

The hands of the clock on the mantelshelf crept on-

ten o'clock, eleven, half-past eleven, twelve.

Unable to control himself longer, he sprang up and went

to the telephone, rang through to the doctor.

How was Mrs. Holt yesterday? Very well? Ah, he had almost feared—— No, he had heard nothing. What was that? She was writing a letter when the doctor called? Oh, the relief—the unspeakable relief! That letter was for him—he was sure of it. It must be on its way now.

He sat lost in a dream of the future, until a sharp rap

at the door made him start to his feet with a sharp:

"Come right in! Well, boy, what is it?"

"A lady to see you, sir." And Marie Courtice's card tendered him.

Marie—good old Marie—with the letter. He knew—he knew!

She came in very quiet, strangely quiet for her. If he had not been so absorbed in his inner excitement he must have noticed it, but it passed unmarked, and, keen though his eyes usually were, he never saw that morning how redrimmed with tears hers were beneath the heavy cosmetics.

He went forward as she entered, hand outstretched, the old, flashing smile lighting his face, grey eyes shining

with an unquenchable hope.

"Marie, I'm real glad to see you."

She gave him her hand, trying hard to muster a smile, a queer, twisted effort, very different from her usual jovial hail-fellow-well-met look.

"Are you, old dear?" she said. And it was surprising how softened and womanly the coarse, blatant voice had become. Strange that the change made no impression on the man whose hand she held so closely.

She let it drop, glanced at him swiftly, and turned away.

"Aren't you surprised to see me?"

"Surprised? No." He moved to the table where he had been sitting before she came, his eager eyes fastened upon her. "I've been expecting a message—from Marion. I wrote, you know, asking when I could see her, and doc. says he believes she was writing me yesterday—"

He broke off, waiting for her to speak the words he longed for, but as she made no answer he added quickly,

almost imperatively:

"You have-brought it?"

Marie hesitated, turned about to face him.

"Yes, I've—I've brought it," she said huskily, and began to search clumsily in her smart handbag, drawing it out reluctantly.

At sight of the envelope his hand shot forward, and as

suddenly drew back, the smile gone from his face.

She made no attempt to give it him, almost it seemed that her fingers closed on it more firmly, and, in glancing up, surprised, their eyes had met, and he discovered that look. What was it? Surely not pity.

He drew a quick breath, standing motionless, staring at her. Why—why should she pity him? He who was to be the happiest man in the world. What was the

meaning of it? What did that letter contain?

She was speaking now, speaking as he had never heard her speak before—as his mother might have spoken—so gentle, so compassionately. Why? Why?

"Old boy, don't take it too hard—try to bear up—-'

"Give me the letter!"

"No, no; let me break it to you first—tell you—"

"Give me the letter!" he said harshly, and before that look even bold, confident Marie was effectually silenced.

He had it in his hand now, the letter he had been yearning for, counting the minutes——

He stared at it like a man in a trance-wondering-

wondering.

After a while he sank into his chair, reading nothing but the superscription—" John Fortescue, Esq."—" John Fortescue, Esq."—over and over again.

So long he sat that Marie, watching, had to bite her lips to keep from screaming aloud, so tense was the atmosphere, but presently she saw his hand move, turn the envelope over, and, with one sharp rip, tear it open.

A fairly long letter—longer than he had expected. His eyes travelled slowly upward, became concentrated

on the first lines.

It began abruptly, with no word of endearment.

"John,-When you get this letter-"

He could not grasp it. Everything seemed distant, blurred. He tried again, slowly.

"When you get this letter I hope—O that I should ever have to write it !—I hope to be miles away——"

He had understood that! Miles away—while he was reading—gone! His face, drained of every drop of blood, betrayed how the blow had struck home.

Marie crept closer and yet closer to that bowed form and dark, bent head, the ready tears running in little

furrows amid the paint and powder on her cheeks.

"Miles away, never perhaps to see you again, though I love you with all my heart and soul——"

Loved him! She said she loved him! Laugh, you fool, at the exquisite joke!

"If you could only understand the pain, the agony, I suffer in parting from you, in severing myself from all I hold dear, the hope I once had of returning to the place where those happy months were spent, you would find it in your heart to forgive me. Try to believe it is best for me to go—that we never could be happy with the thought of him, and of that awful night, between us. We only met that our hearts might be broken, so it seems to me.

"Never think I blame you. I learnt enough, those

months, to understand how different your standards are from ours. If ever I should come to feel that you were justified, see your action, the whole circumstances, through Western eyes, though it be years hence, I will come to you.

"A long good-bye, my dear, dear friend. I use the term no one can condemn, that which you proved to be,

and for which I first loved you.

" MARION."

The letter dropped from his hand upon the table with a faint rustle, the only sound in the still room. It lay there, a mere scrap of delicately tinted paper, yet with power hidden in the written words upon it to mar a life, to break a heart.

Deserted by the woman upon whom he had built his great faith, it was left to the one he had at first despised to give him the only touch of sympathy, of tender compassion.

She could find no words—she was too choked, too over-come—but the plump, beringed hand went out and covered the clenched, tanned fist resting on the table in an action

all the more perfect in its simplicity.

The gentle pressure roused him. He looked up. Few would have recognised him at that moment, only the eyes seemed alive in their wide, stricken stare, the rest more like the set features of a stone image.

But the very pitifulness of the face bending over him, fat and commonplace though it might be, melted the

hardness, the frozen grief.

She saw the firm lips quiver like those of a hurt child, a sudden spasm change the terrible expression. He rose hurriedly from his chair, sending it roughly backward.

"Pardon me," he said hoarsely. "I—I am not myself—you are very kind——" And, brushing past her, was

gone into the bedroom and the door fast closed.

Fast closed? Aye, but not fast enough to shut out from her ears the most heartrending sound in the world—the sound of a strong man weeping, weeping over the grave of his lost hopes, his shattered dreams.

CHAPTER XXVII

On a fine, sunny morning in the middle of March some two years later Bob Walton sat opposite Mrs. Foster at the breakfast-table in the sitting-room of the ranch at Lone Star Creek demolishing, with the keen, appreciative appetite of the healthy man, a generous helping of deliciously cooked bacon and eggs.

As far as the home was concerned it needed but a glance to see that everything was unchanged. Nothing had been altered since the day which saw the departure of John Fortescue to England, but time and care had laid their hands on his young deputy, turning the light-hearted, boyish youngster into a serious, level-headed man.

In Fortescue's absence he had controlled the vast acres with a steady hand, a quick eye, and alert brain that proved the wisdom of the former's choice of a partner. With willing helpers about him—for the boys, knowing his worth, had responded readily to his leadership—it was not surprising to find the whole concern in a thriving condition, even more prosperous than when Fortescue held the reins, for the present head of the firm indulged in no philanthropic schemes nor spent lavishly. Partner he might be acknowledged by others, but to himself he never admitted the fact. Fortescue's foreman, Fortescue's steward, guarding his interests—that was the attitude he took up inwardly.

Yet the results of his labour brought no joy to Bob's heart. His thoughts never ceased to follow the man who, since that day on which he had lost all he held dear, had become a wanderer on the face of the earth, turning his back on home and old memories in an endeavour to win

forgetfulness.

Two years since he left—two long years of loneliness and weary waiting for the pal who watched day by day for Fortescue's return.

Letters came, but very infrequently. The postmark of each one told its tale—Paris, Monte Carlo, Cairo, and, later,

San Francisco, Chicago, and, lastly, New York. As far as they knew, the traveller was still in that city, for he had said nothing in his brief note of a month or two ago about future plans.

Bob, having finished his meal and lit a cigarette, sat thinking of this silence, elbows resting on the table, forehead

frowning over his clouded blue eyes.

Mrs. Foster, watching him, as she often did, with a wonderful look of sympathy on her kind, motherly facefor Bob had grown very dear to her—sighed a little, guessing at the root of his trouble.

"Still thinking, Bob?"

He raised his eyes, staring at her across the table.

"Yep-still thinking. There ain't much else we ken

do, is there?"
"Except keep on hoping," she returned quietly; and then after a moment, as he made no reply: "He'll come

back in God's good time, lad."

"Wal, I wish the Almighty'd see fit to hustle a bit. I'm sure sick o' this game, ma'am," was the gloomy response. "You wouldn't think two years was sech a powerful long time, would you?" He paused, lowering his eyes. "I—I wonder if he's got over it any?"

"Time is a great healer, my boy," said Mrs. Foster, in her gentle way. "He may not forget-I can't imagine Mr. Fortescue forgetting—but it may grow more bearable. He'll come to feel, presently, the need of his old home, his old ways. Don't fret. I know you miss him real bad, but there's the boy now. He counts for something, doesn't he?"

She had touched on a happy subject. Bob's face softened

instantly.

"Bless his heart, I reckon so!" he cried, blue eyes "Ain't he just cute? He'll be a dandy boy, lighting up. ma'am.'

Then as suddenly the gladness died out. He hunched

his shoulders despondingly, head drooping forward.

"What's the good of him bein' smart an' quick when he ain't here ter see him? I wish "—a flash of something harder, something bitter, flared up—"I wish I knew where ter find that woman!"

"Now, now!" began Mrs. Foster soothingly.

"I do. I wish I could tell her jest what I think."

"Bob, you promised to try and think more kindly—"

"How ken you, when you know the ruin she brought? He might have bin sittin' here jest as he used to if she'd never come here. An' then she hadn't the pluck ter stand by him. Hadn't the pluck ter see him and tell him straight from the shoulder—jest sends a letter sayin' as how she's gone!"

"Oh, Bob, you forget the awful shock, her long illness. Oh, if I know anything of her, from what you have told me, she must have suffered terribly—terribly! Bob, judge not——"She broke off, adding, after a moment: "If

she had only known about Dolly!"

"If I ever run across her—it ain't likely, seein' we don't know and ain't got no idea where she went—but if I do

she'll know right enough!"

"I hope you never do, then. She has had tragedy enough in her life, poor soul. I'd like things to come out right for her sake as well as for his, Bob. I often wonder where she is—eating her heart out somewhere in loneliness."

"She ain't hurt more'n him," began Bob sternly. He would have said something further, but there came a sound of heavy footsteps in the passage, a knock on the door behind him, and he sprang up, speaking with a sharp change of tone.

"Come in! Oh, that the mail, Weston?"

Weston entered with the bag, throwing it down upon the table with a cheerful "Good-morning, ma'am!" to Mrs. Foster. He was not alone. Behind him came a silent figure in black trousers and coat, slipping noiselessly into the room and hovering in the background until the big, bronzed rancher had departed, then creeping forward with stealthy steps. Seemingly absorbed in sorting the letters, Bob was nevertheless fully conscious of the close approach of Ah Wing. Always when the mail arrived he might be seen, as now, creeping nearer, with his almond eyes fastened on the batch of envelopes in Bob's hand, and the latter, understanding, never failed to say, as he said now:

" Wal?"

"Mister Bob get letter from boss, eh?"

"Dunno," said Bob, rapidly glancing through for the sight of the well-known writing. "Yep!" No mistaking the delight as he snatched it up, the suppressed eagerness. "Now what's he got to say?"

It was ripped open in an instant. Hard to say who waited the more breathlessly, Ah Wing or Mrs. Foster. Both pairs of eyes were centred on the paper in Bob's

hand.

"'Dear old pal,'" he read slowly, slowly of necessity, for he was no great scholar, "'I expect you will be surprised, and I hope glad, to hear that I am—' My God!" Bob was on his feet, jumping about the room in a wild dance of overwhelming joy. "He's coming home! Ah Wing, you ole villain, don't stand there grinnin'! Git out o' my way! Ma'am, I'm sure crazy. Look! 'I'm coming home in about three weeks' time!' D'you see it?" He thrust the paper before her slightly bewildered but equally delighted eyes. "Ain't it jest marvellous? I must sure tell the boys!"

He was gone like a shot out of a gun, running through the garden, clearing the gate in a wild leap, whooping like

an Indian.

Mrs. Foster turned with dimmed sight to the letter that had caused this outburst of delirious joy.

"DEAR OLD PAL,—I expect you will be surprised, and I hope glad, to hear that I am coming home in about three weeks' time. Tell the boys-I know they will be pleased—but I trust you not to let there be any excitement when I get back. I couldn't stand it. Just let me slip in quietly without any fuss.

"It's two years, Bob—and the pain is just as great as it ever was. Don't think by that I'm coming home to be a misery to all about me-I've learnt to laugh again and keep a stiff upper lip, but life's lost its sweetness, old

friend.

"I'm longing to get back. It may be lonely, it may be remote and quiet in the outlying places, but, by God! it's clean and wholesome. There's more than bad air in the big cities of the world, Bob. I sometimes wonder if I'll ever get the stench of vice and sordidness out of my nostrils.

"I feel I've been wrong to stay away so long. I reckon we don't talk much sentiment, boy, but I'd like you to know I've missed you badly, you and the old faces.

"My regards to Mrs. Foster. Make her understand my return will make no difference to her unless she wishes it. I can't part with any of you.

"I often wonder about the boy-and thank God

there's something left for me to care about."

Meanwhile Bob had burst in on the boys, who were sitting at breakfast in the great log cabin behind the huts, where their meals were always served.

They all looked up, some got up, excited instantly at the sight of Bob's face, sensing something unusual. Not one was missing, all that Fortescue had left were there, some a little damaged in the course of two years through accidents and "scraps," but otherwise whole.

"Boys, he's coming home—the boss!"

No need to explain. They had grasped it in a moment, and a cheer that would have gladdened the wanderer's heart went up to the roof, a lusty, ringing yell that set the echoes answering. Then they did what would have astonished any stranger looking on, commenced to dance, even as Bob had done, like a bunch of crazy loons, shouting and tumbling over each other until lack of breath sobered them down a bit.

"Wal!" cried Weston, the first to recover. "An' ter think I carried that bag an' never guessed what was in it! Say, yer not bluffin'?"

Bluffin'?" echoed Bob, with tremendous scorn. "Do I look that way? When I get jokin' on that subject

I reckon it's time fer the bug-house!"

Never were men so genuinely, so unfeignedly glad. A perfect babel of sound followed, everyone trying to speak at once. What they would do, the welcome they would

give him, the improvements that must take place before he arrived. Three weeks! Reckon they had pretty near time to do out the club-house—and all the huts—and fix up the stables—and—and—— And in the midst of it Tommy Brennan's voice, rising plaintively above the others:

"Say, while you're jawin' this 'ere corfee's froze ter a

slab ! "

A sudden silence fell as the piping words rang out. They

stared at each other for one long moment, then:

"My Gawd!" said Weston, in an awestruck whisper.
"At a time like this ter be thinkin' of his blarsted stummuck!"

Leaving them to dispose of the erring Tommy as they would, Bob returned to the house, slightly subdued to when he had left it, but still highly elated and jubilant, as was natural, and entered the door whistling between his teeth.

He was met in the passage by Ah Wing, no longer blackclad, but now attired in a suit of such brilliant sky-blue that Bob fell back in more than mock amazement, pretending, with upraised hand to his eyes, to be nearly blinded by the wonderful apparition.

Ah Wing's usually impassive face broke into a slow, beaming smile. Smoothing the coat down lovingly with

his slim fingers, he said enquiringly:

"Velly nicee, heh?"

"Great!" cried Bob earnestly. "You look like a real live mandarin! Don't you go makin' it dirty, though, afore the boss gets here. What's the idea 'bout wearin' it terday?"

With face suddenly gone serious again, Ah Wing jerked

an expressive head towards the sitting-room.

"Boss Werner—him come long way see Mister Bob. Tellee him boss come back velly soon—show him all velly 'appy—"

"Werner! Holy Moses, I sure forgot he was comin' this morning." Bob brushed by the boy, flinging open the door. "Werner! Say, old man, how long have you been waitin'?"

A tall figure, with a lean, keen-featured face, rose up out of one of the leather chairs by the hearth, coming forward with outstretched hand.

"Put it there, boy!"—and a close grip that bespoke real pleasure at meeting. "Only just arrived, and seems

I've struck a good day for calling."

"You've heard? Ain't it jest great?" Again Bob's delight boiled over. "We're sure gone plump crazy—"

"I reckon so, soon as the Chink told me. When is he

due?

"Three weeks!" cried Bob, flinging his hat up to the roof and catching it as it fell. "You oughter hear what

them boys is plannin'!"

Werner laughed as he reseated himself in the chair. Bob was too much excited to sit. He continued to stride about the room, firing off a series of exclamations and ejaculations that made the more serious man's eyes twinkle.

But at last it seemed to dawn on him that he was paying very little attention to his visitor, and he came to a standstill by the fireplace with a look of apologetic dismay.

"I'm sure fergittin' me manners!" And then, brightening up instantly as a brilliant thought struck him: "Say, I figur' this 'ere day is the one ter include in a kinda

celebration. What'll you have, ole son?"

Having seen to their creature comforts, he became tranquil enough to seat himself in the chair opposite Werner, and began to take some interest in present affairs, for as he set down his glass he said enquiringly, looking round:

"Where's the boy? I thought you were goin' ter bring

him along."

"So I have. He'll be here in a few minutes. He stopped at the stables to see the horses. By the way, you heard of course about his accident?"

"No," said Bob. "What was that? Nothing serious?" Leaning forward a little, Werner took the cigar from

his mouth.

"Wal, pretty bad. It was this wise. I sent him up to old Al Tomlinson's place for the Christmas vacation, thinkin' he'd be out of mischief—you know Al's place up

by Blue Ridge Canyon? Wal, he hadn't been there more than a week when it happened—goes out riding one of Al's bronks and gets thrown. I warned him before he went that Al's horses were not the kind to come and eat out of your hand. But there it is, he thought he was almighty clever, and took the risk—with unlucky results. The young fool was alone at the time, and might have bled to death if it hadn't been for a woman living near, who, chancing to come along, rendered first aid and took him home to her place. Nursed him up-he's as fat as a pig -and altogether treated him well."

"Good fer her!" commented Bob.

"Sure! The young wretch had the time of his life apparently, and took my expostulations pretty coolly, I can tell you. Said he'd never have known her if he hadn't disobeyed orders."

"Watch out!"-with a broad grin.

"I did! But quite all right. Said, in response to my discreet pumping, that she was quite old—well, middle-aged anyway—about thirty." Werner chuckled. "These youngsters, Bob!" His voice suddenly changed from laughter to seriousness. "Now this affair is the reason for my wanting to see you. Naturally the pair of them got very pally while he was sick, and one day when the boy got on the subject of animals she told young Bill she was on the look-out for a horse. Wal, I've been wondering lately how I could make up to her for the trouble she was put to, and it struck me that if you'd a mount to suit her I'd send it along with my compliments. You get me?"
Bob nodded, albeit he looked somewhat surprised.

"You ain't goin' ter act mean about it. It'll cost you a bit."

"I don't mind that," Werner said quickly, and added haltingly, flushing a little: "After all, the money wouldn't be much use without the boy, would it? I'd do a lot for the woman who saved his life, Bob."

"I reckon you would," returned Bob understandingly. "Wal, d'you know what kinda horse she'd like? Maybe

she had a fancy-"

"Yep, she did. She told him she had a real beaut

once, and she was after one similar—a rich, dark chestnut with white stockings, and a patch of white on his forehead like a star. She said she didn't suppose she'd get one exact, but—why, what's up?"

"Nothin'," said Bob tersely. He had paled somewhat, and there was a curious, startled look in his eyes. "D'you

mind repeatin' that description?"

"Sure!" Werner rejoined, puzzled but obliging. "A rich, dark chestnut with white stockings, and a patch on his forehead like a star. Why, have you seen one like it?"

"Yep," drawled Bob. "I sorta got an idea I have!"

He broke off as the door opened to admit a tall young fellow of about nineteen sufficiently like Mr. Werner to show that they were father and son, save that he was not so lean, though slim enough to disprove his parent's assertion that he was "as fat as a pig."

Bob rose to his feet at the newcomer's entrance, acknowledging Werner senior's introduction with a strangely

searching glance and serious expression.

If Bob looked serious, young Werner seemed positively bewildered. He was gazing about him with open mouth, his face the picture of dumbstruck surprise. It was only as he encountered the steady, blue eyes watching him that he recovered the power of speech.

"Say," he gasped breathlessly, "I guess you'll be thinking me a boob, but might I take a look at your

bedroom?"

It was his father's turn to evince surprise at the strange

request, but Bob betrayed none. He merely said:

"I reckon there's four in this house, but you'd best take a peep at this one." And, crossing the room and the passage, with both men following at his heels, opened the door of Fortescue's room—the same that Marion had occupied during her stay—and stood aside for young Bill to enter. The boy did so, the amazement depicted on his face deepening as he viewed all the details, untouched in their owner's absence. He said nothing until, in returning to the sitting-room, he collided in the passage with the blue-clad figure of Ah Wing, when he instantly let out a yell: "Lo Sing! What in the world——" And then,

as he got a view of the yellow face: "No, you're not Lo Sing, but you're uncommon like him. Dad'—to Werner senior—"d'you think that accident addled my brain any? Here, pinch me and see if I'm dreaming!"

It was then that Bob came forward, tense, tight-lipped, unsmiling, taking the boy, who stared at him in surprise,

by the arm in a close grip.

"Reckon you oughta give us some explanation, kid," he said quietly. "Sit down in this 'ere chair. Don't argue! Jest answer one or two questions I'm goin' ter put—"

The boy obeyed, glancing quickly at the man before him, and from him to his father, who, beginning to see

light, stood silently by.

"Now," continued Bob, as Bill's eyes came back in his direction, "I take it, from your manner, you've seen a

place somethin' like this before. Ain't that so?"

"Like it! Why, except that it is much bigger, it's exactly like the one I stayed in at Blue Ridge Canyon! Everything is the same, right down to the rugs and the curtains, the white paint outside—and that Chink even!"

"An' the woman—the one what nursed you? What

might her name be?"

"Her name? Wentworth! I don't know her Christian

name, she used to sign just M. Wentworth."

"Wentworth," repeated Bob slowly. "I don't know that name. What was she like?"

The boy's face lit up enthusiastically.

"A real good-looker, Mr. Walton-dark, and very

graceful, with a lovely rippling sort of voice-"

"Prettier than the sound o' the creek tricklin' over the stones!" How well Bob remembered saying those words years ago.

"An' what might she be doin' out there? Is she

married? Was anyone else there?"

"No, she was alone, and she did a little poultry farming. She had a wedding ring on, so she must have been married once, but there was no husband there, and I thought it would be cheek on my part to ask. She had a sad kind of face that seemed to stop enquiries about her

private affairs. I did say it was a lonely life for her being there, with only the Chink and no near neighbours, but she said it was the most peaceful she had ever known, and she was happy because she was not far from those she loved. It sounds a funny thing to say, but I had such a peculiar feeling that when I told her my name she seemed to know it. She appeared quite alarmed at first, but of course it might have been my imagination. Say "—he looked appealingly from one to the other—" put me wise about this, will you?"

"Bob," said Mr. Werner, silencing his son with an imperative glance. "What are you going to do? Can

you be sure?"

Bob raised his head. Whether he was angry or glad would be hard to judge from his expression. The bright light was still in his eyes, lips set in a firm, determined line. Without a word he crossed to the table, picking up Fortescue's letter.

"Three weeks," he said slowly, after a moment. "Three weeks." He glanced across at Werner as he repeated it. "I don't know much 'bout women, but it 'pears ter me, if you stuck at the job, you might almost persuade one in that time—or kidnap her—or master her somehow." A smile that was not altogether pleasant touched his lips. "Time enough, anyway, ter get a power o' talk off your chest——"

He paused, taking a deep breath, turned, swept a low bow, as to some visionary person, the cool, sarcastic smile

deepening.

"Say, ma'am," he drawled, "I've called in respec' ter a horse I hear you're requirin'—a rich dark chestnut horse with white stockings, and a white patch on his forehead kinda like a star, a real beaut of a horse, ma'am!"—the voice changed, sharpened, the words ringing out like a pistol-shot—"like that horse, Marion Holt, what you used to have!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

ONCE his mind on a certain course was fully made up, Bob Walton never lost any time in getting into action. Inconvenience or difficulties never entered his head. He just said "I'll do it!" and got moving on the job as quickly as circumstances would allow.

In this instance the start was plain sailing and easy enough. He simply told the boys he was off on a matter of business for a couple of days, made his arrangements with Mrs. Foster, and, early the next morning, mounted his horse at the garden gate ready to make his journey across country to Blue Ridge Canyon.

Mrs. Foster, somewhat uncertain as to the wisdom of the undertaking, and of Bob's handling of the situation,

had walked out from the house to watch his departure, and now stood waiting while he gave his last orders to Dick Richards, who had become foreman of the ranch on

Walton's rise to partnership.

The matter at last completed, Bob gave the man his dismissal, and, bending from the saddle, extended a hand to the woman standing there.

"You won't forget what I said 'bout preparin'?" he

said earnestly.

Mrs. Foster smiled.

"As if I should! Everything will be ready in the hope that you'll be able to bring her back, but, oh, Bob! supposing after all you are making a mistake—supposing

it should turn out to be a stranger!"

"Suppose nothin'!" returned Bob curtly. "I ain't sech an all-fired fool as that! I jest wouldn't be goin' if I weren't dead sure. You do your part, ma'am, an' I'll do mine." Adding, as he touched his horse into movement: "An' expect me when you see me. I may have ter do an almighty lot o' jawin', an' that takes time. Good-bye!"

Barring accidents and unlooked-for events, Bob expected to reach Blue Ridge Canyon the following afternoon. There is little to tell of his journey. The weather being

fine and clear, he found it easy and pleasant; and, having plenty to occupy his mind with his busy thoughts, the day passed quickly enough. At nightfall he made camp on a patch of dry ground, fed himself and his horse, and then, rolling himself in a blanket, laid down by the cheerful fire he had lit and slept soundly.

At early dawn he awoke, and, there being a stream near by, went down to it and refreshed himself thoroughly by dipping his head in the cold water. Fully alert, he remounted his horse, and rode slowly on until the welcome sign of rising smoke told him he was near a homestead, where, some few minutes later, he obtained a good breakfast.

After a leisurely meal he again set out, riding proving more difficult in the rough, hilly country he now entered, but, his horse being sure-footed, no accident checked his progress along the narrow passes and steep slopes; and at noon he rode easily over Al Tomlinson's lands, coming to a halt before the house door.

Al Tomlinson, nicknamed "The Wizard," on account of his spare frame and thin, hook-nosed face, gave him a hearty welcome, for visitors "out West" are few and far between. Bob had only meant to call and make enquiries, but Al insisted that he stayed to dinner, an invitation he was forced to accept, being over-ruled by a majority of voices—Al was the head of a large family of growing boys and girls—and was soon partaking of a generous helping of roast beef and home-grown vegetables with keen satisfaction.

He learnt while eating all he wanted to know about the Tomlinsons' strange neighbour, the woman who lived alone about a mile farther down the road in a log cabin that had been left derelict for years, but which she had bought up and converted, according to those who had seen it, into a delightful dwelling-place.

All evinced the greatest interest in the few facts Bob had perforce to lay before him, even offering to send a posse to the latter's assistance if necessary, a suggestion that considerably tickled Bob, remembering the quiet, delicately bred piece of womanhood who had spent a few brief months at Lone Star Creek. Even if abduction had to be resorted

to in order to get her back, he imagined he was quite capable of carrying out the whole affair single-handed.

With the entire family giving him a cheery send-off, he rode away after dinner, following the direction Al had given him, and in less than a quarter of an hour he got a sight of the spot he was aiming at, knew, as his eyes took in the details of the scene before him, that he had indeed made no mistake.

He reined in his horse, and sat for a moment or two digesting the problem, completely hidden from view by

a large tree.

The house, situated at the foot of the rolling hills sparsely covered with grass and shrubs, was a log cabin, as Al had said, but larger than the average, and painted white, giving an appearance of bright cleanliness and busy life, with its shining, dainty-curtained windows and smoking chimney, in an otherwise deserted spot. The rough ground on which it stood had been cleared for some considerable distance, and fenced round with palings, also painted white, and the portion in front of the house cultivated and made into a garden after the style of one Bob had lately seen.

A shed to the left did duty as a stable, and behind the house there were apparently poultry runs, for the faint sound of clucking hens was borne on the still air to Bob's ears.

As he sat staring the door suddenly opened, and a young Chinese boy, in black trousers and yellow jacket, that in the distance might easily have been mistaken for the figure of Ah Wing, came out carrying a basket in his hand. Where he was bound for and on what errand was beyond Bob's imagination, and a matter he wasted no thought on. He watched with interest, because he saw here a chance he had been hoping for, that of finding the woman, whoever she was, alone.

The boy tripped gaily through the garden, slammed the gate behind him, and passed by along the road within a few yards of the concealed visitor, going in the direction

of Al Tomlinson's house.

"Now for it," said Bob, as the bright jacket disappeared, and, sliding noiselessly from his horse, left it stationary

under the tree and strode quietly forward. He did not think anyone was looking out from the windows, but he had to take the risk.

All was still as he reached the fence. He opened the gate, let it close quietly behind him, and walked steadily up the garden path. At the house door he paused, listening intently and taking keen note of his surroundings. Hearing no sound, he proceeded farther, and, lifting the latch,

opened the door and went in.

He found himself in a very small, square passage, but, though small, it was identical to that of the spacious ranch-house, with its cream-washed walls, its guns and straw-coloured matting. Bob judged from the size of the building and the doors that there were only three rooms, one on each side and another at the back, with

possibly a tiny slip room where the boy slept.

What to do next? Bob succumbed to the temptation of taking off his hat and vigorously scratching his head as he stared at the closed doors. He had no desire to burst unceremoniously into a lady's bedroom. Yet how was he to guess which one led into the sitting-room? Puzzled, he stood thinking deeply and wondering, until a brilliant idea struck him. If the house was intended to be a replica of the other the sitting-room must obviously be on the left side, and, reassured by this, he took a step forward, tapped sharply on the door and immediately turned the handle, surprised inwardly to find himself thrilling as he did so.

Instantly, as he entered, a low, clear voice said quickly: "Put them in the kitchen, Lo Sing." And Bob knew

that his quest was ended.

She was sitting at the table, with her back towards the door, her head bent over a basket of fruit she appeared to be sorting. It needed but a glance to see how like the whole atmosphere was to the house she had loved so dearly; furniture, pictures, rugs, curtains—all were similar. In the brief moment before she looked up Bob had time to realise it, and draw no small measure of hope from the fact.

Apparently wondering why the boy, as she thought, made no attempt to go, she dropped the handful of fruit and turned in her chair, revealing her face to Bob's gaze. "So I've found you, Marion Holt," he said quietly.

Her eyes fastened upon him as she rose to her feet and stood with one hand gripping the table. But no sound left her lips. She was like one suddenly struck dumb, only the awful pallor, the touch of panic in the large, dilated eyes, betrayed the depths of the shock his unlooked-for appearance had given her.

If Bob had any pity for her in his heart there was certainly none to be seen in his face. Perfectly composed, completely master of the situation, he let the door close and walked towards her, scanning her deliberately with

a keen glance.

She was beautiful, far more beautiful than in the old days. Bob admitted it to himself as he took note of the bronzed skin, the slightly fuller figure, clad in short brown riding-skirt and sand-coloured blouse. The beauty not only of feature, but of perfect health from a life spent in the open country.

She was stronger nerved also; that was evident by the way in which, though shaken to the soul, she took a grip of herself after a moment, forcing the words to come.

"Yes, I reckon you've found me sure enough, Bob Walton." The sojourn in the West revealing itself in her speech, an-indefinable accent.

She drew herself up as he came closer, a tinge of red

creeping back into her cheeks.

"What do you want with me-and how-?"

Bob laughed, a short, hard laugh entirely lacking in mirth. "Want?" he drawled. "I've come ter sell you a horse respectin' which you've bin makin' some fool enquiries."

"A horse?"

"Yep. Reckon you ain't got much notion of our brainpower out West, or you sure wouldn't have given that description o' Silver Star to young Bill Werner."

"I don't see--"

"No? Wal, ole man Werner had a kinda fancy to give you one like it, and came ter me 'bout it. Savvy? Maybe you fergot we raise a few animals o' that sort. Wanted ter repay the woman what saved his son's life, ole Werner did, gotta sorta idea she was something uncommon "— he laughed again, but gently this time, like one who sees through another's foolishness with a kindly eye—" sorta good Samaritan, y' know, tender-hearted, self-sacrificing, an' all that. Funny how folks git them ideas, ain't it?"

She was watching him intently, breathing fast.

"What ideas?"

"Why, 'bout you bein' sech a peach—kind, an' good, an'—"

She interrupted with a sharp, challenging:

"Why shouldn't he think so?" A slow smile touched Bob's lips.

"No reason in the world," he said easily. "It's natural, lookin' at you, ter kinda make a mistake like that. O' course I never let on—"

"Let on!"

"Yep, let on 'bout him makin' what folks call a error o'

judgment, y' know," Bob explained patiently.

She continued to gaze at him, eyes sparkling, colour now high, as she realised that he was calling the tune to which she must dance. The more pleasant the tone, the more bitter the feeling behind it—she knew.

"You don't agree with Mr. Werner, then?"

"Agree?" he queried politely.

"Yes, agree." She threw back her head. "All about my character. You don't think me kind, and good, and all the other adjectives?"

He laughed amusedly.

"Wal, it'd be funny if I did, wouldn't it?"

" Why?"

"Why?" He looked mildly surprised. "Why, because I know you ain't! I couldn't make sech a mistake when I remember "—he saw the sudden shrinking, the hand upraised as if to ward off the coming words, but he never faltered—"when I remember how cruel you treated my best pal."

She made no sound, only her eyes implored him-to

have mercy.

"You sure must have a yeller streak somewhere, Marion Holt, or you jest couldn't have done it."

She moistened her dry lips, forcing a reply, a mechanical echo:

"Done it I"

"Ter lead him on-him what never loved a woman, other than you, in his life—ter nearly break his heart, an' then, when he most needed you, ter take the coward's way out. D'you know, d'you wanta know what he's bin doin' this two year-but there, it can't interest you, it wouldn't touch sech as you ter think of him wanderin' miles and miles from home because he can't bear the sight of it, with only the thought of a woman who deserted him when he was in trouble ter keep him company!"

"Bob, have pity!"

"Pity? That's a good word fer you ter use!"

"You don't understand—you can't. Bob, he killed—

yes, killed my husband!"
"Killed!" The slow smile deepened on his face, a smile more terrible than any expression of anger. "D'you know what I'd like ter do?" He waited, but she made no sound, and he leant forward, driving the words home, face gone hard and relentless. "If I knew where ter find his grave, that man you speaks so soft of—that man you calls your husband-d'you know what I'd like ter do? I'd like ter tear the earth up with these two hands an' hammer in his dead face with these fists o' mine-aye, I would!"

So awful was the tone, the horror of the words uttered as he uttered them, she reeled back half fainting, sickening as she heard. He caught her, held her, despite the frantic

effort she made to free herself.

"That seems terrible ter you, maybe, but you've got worse ter hear afore I go! An' then I'm goin' ter ask

you if that'd be bad enough fer sech as him."

"You've something more terrible to tell me?" she whispered. "Oh, for the love of God, for the love you bear towards him, if it is anything that will explain, make me see things in a clearer light. Speak-tell me."

"Sit down."

She hesitated, with a look of entreaty.

"Sit down!" he repeated quietly. "There's much ter say, an' you don't look fit ter stand."

She sank into the chair he pulled forward, covering her face a moment with her hands. He waited patiently until they dropped again and she looked up.

"Now!"

He turned away, crossed the room slowly, standing with his broad back towards her, staring out through the window.

"It's goin' ter hurt some," he said, and felt rather than saw the way she braced herself to meet it. After a brief instant of silence he continued, without moving his position. "You remember—Dolly Costello?"

"Dolly!" Her voice betrayed surprise at mention of

a name quite unexpected. "Why, of course I do."

"Wal, she's dead," he said bluntly.

It was too much. Unnerved for the second time, emotion found its vent in a burst of tears, genuine grief that would not be checked for a moment, very painful to hear. Strange the expression of Bob's face as he listened, though he made no attempt at consolation, an expression that belied the hardness of his speech and manner.

The storm was of short duration. He heard the sobs grow quieter, the chair move, and started as a hand was laid upon his arm, turning his eyes reluctantly to the tear-stained face beside him, which no sense of false shame induced her to hide.

" Bob---"

"Bob, be a little kinder to me! I shall be able to bear it better if you will only try to be kind. I am so much in

the dark, so bewildered—tell me everything."

He faced about, took the slender wrists in his strong grasp as if he would, by his own steady touch, fill her with courage to meet the truth.

"You gotta be hurt a lot more yet," he said. "But

you'll be happier after-"

"Only tell me," she answered. And, with her hands held tightly in his own, he told her—told her all there was to tell, from the very beginning to the bitter end, omitting nothing, covering nothing. Only once she spoke, when he was recounting the poignant details of Dolly's passing—a low, moaning cry: "Oh, Dolly—Dolly!" It threatened to unman him, for all his composure, but after

a moment he was able to go on, following up the story bit by bit. And gradually he saw the face before him change, the deathly pallor of horror give place to the bright flush of flaming anger, the eyes flash with the passion of wrath that beset her. As he finished she wrenched herself from his hold, stepping back, an arresting figure in her scorn and outraged pride.

"My God!" she cried fiercely. "Why—why do you

"My God!" she cried fiercely. "Why—why do you allow such things to be? Oh that I should have known, have lived with, a creature so vile, so despicable, so loath-

some—oh, there are no words to describe him!"

She tore the wedding-ring from her finger, and, with a

quick movement, flung it into the heart of the fire.

"Would I might rid myself of his memory as easily! I feel contaminated, soiled, dragged in the mire, by contact with such as he." She flung round on Bob, a woman transformed. "Bob, tell me where he is. If it's the other side of the world I'll get there, if I have to crawl all the way on my knees, to ask his forgiveness. Kill him!" she laughed fiercely. "Would to God I had known! My words would have shrivelled his miserable soul long before John reached him." Her voice changed, softened into pitiful tenderness. "Oh, Dolly—Dolly—so young—so sweet—it seems incredible! God forgive me for being so blind, for giving him the opportunity. I should have known! I should have known! Bob, what can I do to atone to him, to that poor child? She is beyond all help, all comfort—and he—"

"He still needs it," said Bob quietly. "An' there's

Dolly's boy."

"Dolly's boy—oh, do you think John would let me have him, care for him? Bob, I would be such a good mother—for Dolly's sake—you know I would!"

"He might," said Bob slowly. "You'd best ask him."

"Ask him!" She stood still, hands upraised to her heart, eyes fastened upon him. "But you said he was miles away—miles—"

He smiled.

"He's comin' home," he told her gently. "Soon—very soon—"

"Coming home—soon!"

She just breathed the words in a faint whisper. He saw her sway, stagger, and caught her in his arms, held fast against him. She was not unconscious, only storm-tossed, harried, torn between hope and despair, and she rested there a moment, feeling the comfort of his warm clasp and close proximity after so much suffering and doubt.

It was a dangerously sweet moment for Bob, with that slight form held so, the alluring face, with its parted lips, and half-closed eyes, lying on his breast, the subtle scent of her creeping up to his nostrils. Years afterwards, when someone asked him why he had never married, Bob remembered, and answered with his usual direct simplicity: "I reckon when you've held the best in your arms once you kinda don't like the notion o' fillin' 'em with something second rate!"

Whatever he felt inwardly, no change came over his expression as he looked down on her, nor did his arm waver, his speech falter. This woman was nothing to him, never could be anything to him, and, even had there been no thought of Fortescue, he was too modest, too humbleminded to aim so high. She would always stand, like Fortescue, on a higher plane, to be admired, worshipped, served, but never desecrated by such as he.

No hidden thought, no secret impulse, marred the purity of his heart. In this moment, finding her fairer than all other women, the most desirable, he could say honestly, cheerfully out of that great love which no woman in the

world could ever outrival:

"Old pal, I'm real glad you've won her!"

Marion understood nothing of this. When, somewhat calmer, she looked up, the frank, blue eyes were bright, shining with so clear and steadfast a light as he said: "I've come ter take you home!" that some words she had written with so much pain years ago came rushing back.

"If ever I should come to feel that you were justified see your action, the whole circumstances, through Western eyes-" "Oh, Bob-Bob, I've seen it at last-seen it clearly through Western eyes-for I've seen it through

vours, thank God 1"

CHAPTER XXIX

"Boss!"

"Old pal!"

Nothing more than that when, three weeks later, John Fortescue stepped from the train at Lone Star Creek's

quiet station to find Bob Walton awaiting him.

No words were needed to emphasise their joy at meeting. It was patent in the firm, close clasp of the hand, the long, penetrating glance between them from eyes grown sus-

piciously moist at sight of each other.

So they stood a moment noting the changes time had wrought. Gone was the unformed, impetuous youngster Fortescue had left behind. In his place stood a thick-set, steady-eyed, confident man moulded by trouble and responsibility. On his side Bob saw not the old Fortescue, care-free, smooth-browed, cheerily smiling, but the Fortescue who had tasted of the waters of adversity, thinner of face, stern-lipped, stern-eyed, a little hardened and embittered, yet carrying himself superbly, with the air of one who had by his own powerful will thrust his trouble into the background of his life, subduing it outwardly at least.

Sincere affection and unswerving devotion could still touch the hidden depths of his bruised heart, a heart which had with the passing years grown somewhat cynical and distrustful. As his glance rested on the flushed face before him, with its slightly quivering lip and over-bright eyes, a look of wonderful tenderness swept over his own, and his arm slipped up in a sudden, quick movement encircling the younger man's shoulders, his firm hand fastening upon him

in a tight grip.

"You great boob!" he laughed quietly, but with a break in it that betrayed the inward emotion; and then, after a moment, when both had recovered their normal bearing:

"It's good to be back, Bob!"

"An' it's good ter have you," returned Bob earnestly. "It sure is! You ain't altered—too bad. I—I sure bin scared, sometimes, wonderin' how you'd come back.

You've bin ter some almighty queer parts, boss—I—

He broke off with a half-shamed, flickering smile, though his eyes were fastened on Fortescue's face in a strangely searching glance. Under the scrutiny the latter flushed a little, but it was not the flush of guilt, as his words proved.

"I knew you would be anxious; maybe it helped to bring me back same as I went, old pal. When the world goes to pieces for you there doesn't seem to be much worth keeping straight for, except the thought of those who care, those sitting at home—waiting." His voice deepened, shook with a gust of passion. "God help any who are alone! Boy, never crave for experience—it's cruel! I've seen things——"He shuddered, drawing a sharp breath. After a pause, adding hurriedly: "There's no cure that way, either. It only makes the hunger more fierce, the longing for what you've missed more insistent. The contrast—there! that's enough about myself. How are——"Again he broke off, but for a different reason this time, and swung round with changing face. "Why, good heavens——"

His voice was drowned in the wild clatter of horses' hoofs, of ear-piercing yells and cheers, as the boys, between a dozen and twenty, in a flying, dust-raising mass, swept down upon them, bringing laughter and careless good-humour—an altogether lighter element—in their train.

"Give me a chance to breathe, boys! Say, Bob, is this carrying out my instructions? Dick, shake! I've been hearing great things of you. Harry, I'll need that hand later! Leave a few bones in it, there's a good fellow. Yes, back for good, Bill. No place like home! Watch out, boys, I'll be a regular terror after such a long rest. You'll need to rise early to be catching me slacking! Tommy—where's Tommy? What's that horse you're holding, kid. Not Marquis! Surely not Marquis!"

Yes, Marquis! No buggy-riding for the boss! His own favourite, groomed until his sleek coat shone like satin, stood before him, and in an instant Fortescue was beside

him, with his arm round the glossy neck.

"Marquis, have you forgotten me, lad? He hasn't, Bob. He's as pleased as the rest. Dick—"

Willing hands caught the long dust-coat he flung off, and like a flash he was in the saddle, another cheer rising to the sky as the boys realised he had lost nothing of his old grace and quickness.

They fell into line immediately, and in less than a second the station was again quiet and deserted, save for a signalman left gazing helplessly after the cloud of dust made by

the fast-disappearing bunch.

On the way to the house Fortescue learnt from Bob how things were faring, noting inwardly the new air of authority and capability the latter displayed, drawing him out by a quick comment or sharp interrogation, finding nothing to complain of in the ready answers, and feeling just pride and admiration in this man after his own heart. He was glad to see also that, though changed, Bob seemed to have recovered from the shock of disillusionment and horror he had suffered more than two years back, and sighed inwardly, thinking how much he would give to have his own burden lifted. Strange that both of them should have wasted the fulness of their devotion on two women who had proved-no, no, God forgive the thought. Neither were false—worthless. It was just that one was too weak, the other too strong; one ruled by heart, the other by conscience—and who was he, John Fortescue, to judge?

Ah, the house at last—unchanged in every aspect—the

dear old house!

He drew rein at the gate and sat gazing at it, overwhelmed by a flood of bitter memory, and the boys, taking the hint from his silence, his brooding look, nudged each other stealthily and quietly trotted off to the stables. Had he been less taken up with his thoughts he might have wondered at the state of suppressed excitement prevalent among them, a sort of joyous anticipation that seemed uncalled for under the circumstances.

Only Bob remained, apparently calm and sympathetic, yet betraying by the sparkle in the bright, blue eyes that he, too, shared in the general feeling.

At last, with a profound sigh, Fortescue turned in the

saddle and glanced at his friend.

"I don't feel like tea yet, Bob. I'm going up to the creek."

A shade of disappointment clouded Bob's face, but it was gone in a moment, and as the boss turned his horse he fell in beside him, riding with him to the creek, neither

speaking again.

By the fallen log, where he had said that last good-bye to Marion Holt, Fortescue dismounted, and, uncovering his head, as if he walked on sacred ground, strode slowly along the grassy bank towards a great tree that had something gleaming white in the sunlight under its shade, a grassy mound marked by a rearing cross, the only outward sign of Dolly's resting-place.

It was on the cross that Fortescue's eyes rested as he

halted there, reading the words engraved:

To the memory of D. C. Died 10th January, 19—Aged 20 years.

And under the brief announcement the simple words, meaning much to those who understood:

"In Haven."

"I didn't know—" Fortescue turned to the silent figure beside him. "How long has that been there? You never mentioned it."

"It was put there last week," returned Bob quietly.

"As recent as that? I meant to attend to it when I got back."

Bob made no reply.

"You have done just what I would wish." He repeated the last words under his breath, softly: "In Haven!" And, after a moment: "I'm glad someone keeps it fresh

with flowers. Mrs. Foster, I suppose."

Again Bob returned no answer, but as he looked at the fragrant blooms at the foot of the cross it was not the form of a grey-haired, middle-aged woman he saw in his mind's eye stooping there, but a slender, rounded figure, with small, white hands that hovered over them with loving touch, and seemed to see the tears that had dropped upon them, hear the low, tender voice saying:

"I couldn't bear to leave it with nothing to show where

she lies, Bob."

"Let us go," said Fortescue suddenly, and the younger man, with a swift glance at the set face, turned away, guessing at the hidden pain, and not only pain, but remorse and overwhelming regret.

They rode back again in silence, but at the gate Fortescue

seemed to recover, and said in his usual manner:

"Call Tommy to take the horses, Bob. I've a lot to talk to you about while we have tea."

Strange that such a simple remark should set Bob

stammering, his face reddening.

"Er—er, I'd rather take 'em round myself, boss. I'm kinda partic'lar—er—I won't be long. You go in—you'll find it jest the same——"

"Righto," said Fortescue easily, though a little surprised.
"Make it snappy!" And, opening the gate, walked away

up the garden path.

Bob stood a moment, watching him with eyes that had grown suddenly wet. "God bless him," he muttered, with

a half sob, as he turned the horses.

It was not all joy for Bob that day. As he thought of the future, the new influences, the new ties to be in Fortescue's life, he felt very lonely. Things would never be the same again. He would come second now—no, third, for there was the boy as well now. He was to realise his mistake later.

Meanwhile, Fortescue had entered the house, and stood in the familiar, square hall gazing about him with softened face.

The place had not the deserted air it had worn that terrible evening years ago, when he returned to it blind with misery from seeing the Holts off at the station. It looked bright now with sunlight and life, and as he paused there came to his ears the pleasant sound of tinkling teacups, the lilting voice of Ah Wing, mingled with the quiet tones of Mrs. Foster, and to his nostrils the delightful smell of hot cakes. He knew he ought to go straight to the kitchen and greet them, but, with the embarrassment of the man who has been absent a long while, and feeling as yet not quite sure of himself, he turned instead to the left, and entered the sitting-room. Then he stood still, staring. The table was already laid for tea, and standing by it a little

boy of about three years of age, who looked round as Fortescue entered, returning the stare with interest and an absolute lack of surprise which showed he was well used to all sorts and conditions of men.

No need to ask whose child he was. The golden curls clustering on the small head, the round, dimpled face, browned by the sun, and great, blue eyes betrayed his birth. As Fortescue gazed at him a deep wave of thankfulness swept over him that there was nothing to be seen of Gerald Holt in those tiny features. God grant the same could be said of the baby character it was his task to mould.

When he went forward the child showed no sign of nervousness. Had he drawn back or whimpered Fortescue would have been alienated at once, but the steady regard, the utter fearlessness, won him completely. He stooped down, smiling as he had not smiled for many a long day.

"Hello, little man!" he said cheerfully, and:

"Hello!" the little man instantly replied in a clear, crisp treble, without a shade of embarrassment or shyness.

Delighted, Fortescue went nearer, holding out a per-

suasive hand.

"Will you come to me? You seem a real nice little boy."

"No, I don't know who you are. And Auntie Foster won't let cowboys come in here; she says their boots are awfu' dirty." He looked at the man's immaculate patent with a doubtful eye. "Are you a cowboy?"

"Yes, sometimes."

"Oh!" The little fellow took another long stare at him, evidently debating the reply. After a moment he said:

"What's your name, stranger?"

The question, put so, was too much for Fortescue's gravity. Everything else forgotten, he roared with laughter, in which the child joined, conscious, as children often are, that he had said something funny.

Having recovered a little, but still laughing broadly,

Fortescue said:

"My name is John-John Fortescue."

"Oh, that's my new uncle's name. Are you my new uncle? Auntie Foster said he was coming home."

"Yes, I'm Uncle John," confirmed Fortescue quickly,

glad to find his relationship established so easily. "Will

you come to me now?"

The little one came at once, and, lifting him in his arms, Fortescue carried him to the windows, searching the baby face with his keen eyes. How like he was. Every feature was Dolly's—eyes, hair, sweet, red lips; he drew him close in a passion of newly awakened pity and affection.

"I like you," said the boy earnestly, apparently not objecting to the pressure of the strong arms about him.

"Thank you," returned Fortescue, with becoming gratification, though the firm lips twitched. "I'm real glad to hear it. So they told you I was coming to tea, eh?"

The child nodded.

"That's why I've got this new suit," he explained,

drawing attention to the fact.

It was a beautiful little suit of dark brown wool, trimmed on the tunic with mingled shades of blue and gold. Not the sort of suit Mrs. Foster's rather heavy hands could fashion, but, man-like, Fortescue drew no inference from that. He only said:

"Say, you're real smart! It's a lovely suit—and all for

me, eh?"

Again the child nodded. "Uncle Bob liked it—"

"Did he? Do you like Uncle Bob?"

"Ye-s."

"You sound a bit doubtful."

"He won't let me have a live pony."

Fortescue laughed.

"Wise old Bob! So that's why you're not sure, eh? Why won't he let you have one?"

"He says not till I'm five. That's a awfu' long time,

isn't it?"

Fortescue considered the point carefully, with puckered

brow, as if it was indeed a weighty problem.

"Well, maybe it is. We'll see what can be done when you're four, shall we? That's not so very long to wait. A little tiny pony——"

"And a gun?"

"Say"—with astonishment—"you're a fiery young

rascal. A gun! You'll be wanting a tomahawk and somebody's scalp next. No, I'm sorry, little man. No guns yet. Not till you're quite grown up."

"That's what auntie said-my new auntie." "New auntie? You mean Auntie Foster?"

"No, I don't-I mean my new auntie!"

"How can you have a new auntie?" asked Fortescue, puzzled, wondering if this was merely a childish fancy. "Which auntie do you mean?"

"I mean the one Uncle Bob brought—the pretty one." Fortescue's hands closed on the boy in a sudden, fast grip. The one Uncle Bob brought! What did the child mean?

Like a flash he recalled the look of disappointment on Bob's face when they had turned away from the house, the sparkling glance of suppressed excitement when they got back, the confusion as he sent him in alone. What did it mean? No, no, he must not be such a fool as to think—

He forced himself to speak lightly, naturally.

"When did Uncle Bob bring her, eh?"

The question was too much for the boy, who had not yet learned to measure time.

"I don't know," he said vaguely. "The other day." A sound behind him, as if someone moved. He heard it,

but would not look round. He was letting his imagination get out of hand. He dared not look and be disappointed, as he knew he must be. It could not be possible— "Where is she now?" he asked haltingly.

auntie? I haven't seen her."

"You can see her now-if you still want to, John."

He stood still, stood like a man turned to stone. Was he dreaming? Was trouble turning his brain? "You can see her."

He swung round, letting the child slide from his arms to the floor.

She was standing by the tea-table, pretending to arrange the flowers in the centre, eyes downcast, eyes that feared to look at him, and the fleeting colour in her cheeks. She wore a blue dress, very simply made, and over it a dainty apron which gave her a wonderful matronly appearance. It was not Marion Wentworth the popular singer that stood

there, but John Fortescue's wife, John Fortescue's partner, the woman who was to share his hearth and his business, mother his adopted son and all the boys—the home woman, loving, willing, infinitely tender, busy now in her household duties.

Her courage was not proof against the continued silence. Her hands faltered suddenly in their work, became motionless, and with a great effort she lifted her eyes to his. They told her nothing. She encountered the strange, veiled glance she had always found impossible to fathom, and, misinterpreting it, the colour fled from her face, leaving her deathly pale.

There was no response. She stumbled forward, hands

outstretched in entreaty.

"John, I've come, as I said I would. Bob found me, told me everything. John, forgive me, and take me back forgive all the pain I have caused you. John—on my knees!"

She would have fallen at his feet had he not caught her up with a great cry that left her in doubt no longer, a cry of mingled pain and joy, and she was held fast in the strong arms that would never loosen their hold again.

"My God! That you should kneel to me-oh, Marion-

Marion!"

It did not take long to tell each tale of the past two years, to come to a perfect understanding with regard to the whole future.

When, twenty minutes later, Mrs. Foster entered with the loaded tea-tray, she found them sitting quietly on the long cane couch by the windows, the child playing contentedly at their feet.

Fortescue sprang up as she appeared, and, striding forward, took possession first of the tray, and, having set that down, of her two hands, his eyes alight with happiness.

that down, of her two hands, his eyes alight with happiness.
"I'm real glad to see you, auntie," he laughed. "Where have you been hiding all this time?" He stopped suddenly, bending his fine head to kiss the tremulously smiling face. "Bless you for what you have done," he said, with

a quick change of tone. "And for your kindness to my-wife. She has just told me how good you have been to her."

"No better than she deserved, Mr. Fortescue—well, John, then, if you will have it so. I have grown to love her dearly."

Marion had drawn near, and Fortescue slipped his arm about her in a proud gesture that revealed more elo-

quently than words the depths of his feeling.

"She is worth loving," he said quietly; and, after a moment: "You understand we want you to stay with us always? We have been discussing the future, and we both wish it—and I know the boy needs you as well."

"Are you sure?" cried Mrs. Foster, the happy tears springing up. "Are you quite sure? I won't get in your way if only you'll give me a little corner somewhere. I

love the place and the boys."

"We'll found a family," Fortescue laughed. "Won't we, Marion? We're going to keep that log cabin up at Blue Ridge Canyon, and when we're tired of you all down here we're going to slip away for another honeymoon. You've no need to worry about a corner, auntie; there's plenty of ground to extend the house if necessary. I'll get the boys moving on the job as soon as you like. It beats me," he added, with a touch of wonder, "how they managed to keep it dark when they met me. It was a marvel Tommy managed to hold it back."

"Bill was responsible for that," Marion informed him, smiling. "I believe he gave him a good dressing-down before they started as a sort of sample of what he would get if he blabbed! Oh, the slang! John, I'm getting dreadfully rough already. No, not another word until you have had some tea. It's nearly cold now. Where's Bob

got to?'

"He said he wouldn't be a moment—the old villain!" said Fortescue. "He'll be in—good heavens! what's

that?"

It was the sound of a tremendous bumping and banging in the passage. The three looked at each other in mute surprise, which deepened as there came a knock at the door and Bob entered, very hot and flushed, and they could see behind him a large wooden box and several bundles, as if someone was in the act of moving out.

"Why, Bob," cried Fortescue in astonishment, "what's

the idea? Why the luggage?"

Bob came in a little farther, getting, if it was possible, redder at every step, and twisting his hat restlessly in his

"I jest looked in ter tell you I'm goin'," he said lamely. "Going?" echoed his partner blankly. "Going

"Back ter the old hut," Bob explained, stumbling awkwardly over the words. "I'm taking my traps out now, but I'll have ter come back fer the box later. I won't disturb you."

"But what the-" Fortescue stared at him in amazement. "Do you mean you're leaving the house?"

"Yep, of course! 'Tain't likely your wife'll want another man hanging about, boss. I only stopped sorta temp'ry.

Maybe it didn't strike you-"

For all his ready and reasonable explanation, Bob looked the picture of misery at that moment, though he tried manfully to hide it. Fortescue gazed from his pal to Marion, seeking a solution there, but her downcast face, quite calm and unmoved, told him nothing.

Despite his new-found happiness, a chill of disappointment crept over him. He hadn't thought of this! Old Bob to be turned out—the pal to whom he owed everything! Yet what could he say? It wasn't likely Marion

would want another man always in the house.

Helpless, he looked from one to the other, and Bob, seeing plainly how things stood, made ready to depart. "I'll be gettin' now," he said huskily.

He half turned, hesitated, came back, and crossed to Marion's side, twisting the hat restlessly to and fro.

"I-I'd like you ter know," he said, with a great effort, "that I'm sorry I said them words to you what I said when I found you. I ain't said nothin' afore, but I bin real sorry, because o' course I knows you're like what ole Werner said—leastways, not yeller! Take it from me, that was just bluff!"

Without raising her head, and tracing little patterns on the cloth with her finger, she said:

"Still, I reckon you've a very poor opinion of me, Bob." "I have?" cried Bob in surprise. "No, honest I haven't. I think——" He broke off sharply, with a deepening of the hot flush. "What makes you think that

now?"

"Well, you evidently don't want to live too close to me, or you wouldn't be clearing out so quickly."

"Why, 'taint 'cause I wanta go!"

"Why are you, then?"

Something in the upward look, the tone, set Fortescue's eyes twinkling with amusement and delight, his lips smiling. Oh, he ought to have known she would never

disappoint him!

Poor Bob. He hardly knew where he stood or what to make of things. He looked from one to the other in bewilderment, but Fortescue made no response to the imploring glance. He was well content to leave it to Marion now.

"Why am I?" Bob stammered. "Wal, it ain't likely you want me here. I reckon you don't like me over much you ain't got no reason to—I—I bin awful rude at times——"

It was then that he realised his mistake in thinking everything would be changed. There was a change, certainly, but not as he had supposed. He had been rancher, foreman, partner, and friend; he had a new title now,

one that gave him greater joy than all the rest.

As he broke off, with a lump in his throat, two white arms were suddenly flung round his neck in a swift, halfshy embrace, a kiss light as thistledown touched his lips, and her voice, full and glad, rang in his ears, saying words that were echoed in affectionate pride by another, him he loved best in all the world, words he never forgot.

"As if we would let you go! How dare you think it? As if you don't know how much we owe you! Let you go?

We love you too well for that, Brother Bob!"



